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Over the past few years, Yoon Ha Lee has been contributing thoughtful and lyrical sf stories to our pages—"Echoes Down an Endless Hall" was the most recent. Now she turns her hand to the fantasy genre with a tale that draws on her background in mathematics. By the time you read this, Ms. Lee expects to have graduated from Cornell University and she plans to pursue a master's degree in math education...and spin out more such tales, we hope.

Counting the Shapes

By Yoon Ha Lee

How many shapes of pain are there?
Are any topologically equivalent?
And is one of them death?

BIANTHA WOKE TO A HEAVY knocking on the door and found her face pressed against a book's musty pages. She sat up and brushed her pale hair out of her face, trying to discern a pattern to the knocking and finding that the simplest one was impatience. Then she got to her feet and opened the door, since her warding spell had given her no warning of an unfriendly presence outside. Besides, it would be a little longer before the demons reached Evergard.

"Took your time answering the door, didn't you, Lady Biantha?" Evergard's gray-haired lord, Vathré, scowled at her. Without asking for permission, which he never did anyway, he strode past her to sweep his eyes over the flurry of papers that covered her desk. "You'd think that, after years of glancing at your work, I might understand it."

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"Some of the conjectures are probably gibberish anyway." She smiled at him, guessing that what frustrated him had little to do with her or the theorems that made her spells possible. Vathré visited her quarters when he needed an ear detached from court intrigues. "What troubles you this time, my lord?"

He appropriated her one extra chair and gestured for her to sit at the desk, which she did, letting her smile fade. "We haven't much longer, Biantha. The demons have already overrun Rix Pass. No one agrees on when they'll get here. The astrologer refused to consult the stars, which is a first — claimed he didn't want to see even an iffy prediction — " Vathré looked away from her. "My best guess is that the demons will be here within a month. They still have to march, overwhelming army or no."

Biantha nodded. Horses barely tolerated demon-scent and went mad if forced to carry demons. "And you came to me for battle spells?" She could not keep the bitterness from her voice. The one time she had killed with a spell had been for a child's sake. It had not helped the child, as far as she knew.

"Do you have any battle spells?" he asked gravely.

"Not many." She leaned over and tapped the nearest pile of paper. "I was in the middle of this proof when I discovered that I'd have to review one of Yverry's theorems. I fell asleep trying to find it. Give me a few days and I can set up a battle spell that will kill any demons you've already managed to wound." Biantha saw the weariness in the lord's green eyes and flushed. "It isn't much, I know."

"That helps, but it isn't what I came for."

Dread opened at the pit of her stomach. "The Prophecy."

Vathré inclined his head.

"I've tried to pry some sense out of it ever since I learned of it, you know." She rubbed her eyes. "The poetry translates into shapes and equations that are simply intractable. I've tried every kind of analysis and transformation I know. If there's any hope in the rhymes, the rhythms, the ambiguities, don't ask me to show you where it is. You'd do better consulting the minstrels for a lecture on symbolism."

"I don't *trust* the minstrels." His brows drew together. "And any time I consult the other magicians, I get too many uncertainties to untangle. The seers and healers are hopeless. The astrologer gets headaches trying

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to determine where to start. The cartomancer gives me a dozen different *possibilities* each time she casts the cards. As far as the Prophecy is concerned, yours is the only kind of magic I can trust."

Biantha smiled wanly. "Which is why, of course, it's so limited." Sometimes she envied the astrologer, the cartomancer, the enchanters, the healers, the seers — magicians whose powers were less reliable but more versatile. "I'll work on it, my lord."

"A month," he reminded her.

She hesitated. "Have you declared your heir yet?"

Vathré eyed her. "Not you, too?"

She swallowed. "If you die, my lord, someone must carry on. Don't leave the succession in doubt. A problem may have several solutions, but some solutions can still be wrong."

"We've been over this before," he said. "Considering the current state of affairs, I'd have to declare a chain of succession down to the apprentice cook. If anyone survives, they can argue over it. My advisors can rule by council until then."

Biantha bowed her head and watched him leave.

Usually Biantha avoided Evergard's great hall. It reminded her of her former home, the demon emperor's palace, though the scents of lavender and lilacs drifted through the air, not the smell of blood; people smiled at her instead of bowing or curtsying rigidly. Musicians played softly while nobles chattered, idle soldiers gambled for pittances and children scampered in and out, oblivious to the adults' strained voices. A few of the boys were fair-haired, like herself. Biantha closed her eyes briefly before turning along the walls, partly to avoid thinking about a particular fair-haired boy, partly because she had come to study the tapestries for inspiration.

The tapestries' colors remained as vibrant as they had been when she first swore fealty to Lord Vathré upon the Blade Fidora. Biantha had long ago determined the logic by which the tapestries had been arranged, and did not concern herself with it now. Instead, she inspected the scenes of the Nightbreak War.

Here was the Battle of Noiren Field, where webs of starlight blinded a thousand soldiers and angular silhouettes soared above, ready for the

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massacre. Here was General Vian on a blood bay destrier, leading a charge against a phalanx of demons. Here was amber-eyed Lady Chandal weeping over a fallen young man whose closed eyes might also have been amber, flowers springing up where her tears splashed onto the battlefield. Biantha swallowed and quickened her steps. One by one she passed the tapestries until she found what she sought.

Unlike the other Nightbreak tapestries, its border had been woven in rust rather than Evergard's colors, blue and black: rust for betrayal. She stared at the dispassionate face of Lord Mière, enchanter and traitor to Evergard. His had been a simpler magic than her own, drawing upon ritual and incantation. With it he had almost defeated the Watchlanders; only his daughter's knife had saved them.

Symmetry, she sighed. The one thing she had pried from the Prophecy was that it possessed a twisted symmetry. It hinted at two wars between the demons' empire and the Watchlands, and because records of the first war — the Nightbreak War — were scant, Biantha had yet to understand certain cantos, certain equations, that dealt with it. Hours with Evergard's minstrels and historians hadn't helped. Other than herself, only Vathré knew there might be a second traitor among them.

Or that, because they had won the first war, they might lose the second, in a cruel mirroring transformation of history.

"Lady Biantha."

She turned. "Yes?"

The captain — she did not know his name — bowed slightly. "It isn't often that we see you down here, my lady."

Biantha smiled wryly. "A bit too much noise for my work, and on occasion I test spells that might go wrong, sometimes fatally so. My chambers are shielded, but out here...."

In the demon emperor's court, her words would have been a veiled threat. Here, the captain nodded thoughtfully and gestured at the tapestry. "I was wondering why you were looking at this. Most people avoid it."

"I was thinking about the Prophecy," she said, retracing the intractable equations in her mind. There had to be a way to balance term against term, solve the system and read Evergard's future, but it continued to escape her. "I'm worried."

"We all are."

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Biantha paused. "You said 'most people.' Does that include yourself?"

His mouth twisted. "No. It's a useful reminder. Do you ever wish you had stayed at the demon emperor's palace?"

She read honest curiosity in the captain's expression, not innuendo. "Never." She breathed deeply. "I started learning mathemagic there because magicians, even human magicians, are protected unless they do something foolish. Otherwise I would have been a slave or a soldier; I had no wish for the former and no heart, no talent, for the latter."

Such a small word, *foolish*, when the penalty it carried had given Biantha nightmares for years. She had seen the demon emperor touch his serpent-eyed scepter to a courtesan's perfumed shoulder, as if in blessing; had been unable to avert her gaze before she saw the woman's eyes boiling away and splinters of bone erupting through the rouged skin.

The captain looked down. "I'm sorry to have reminded you, my lady."

"A useful reminder," she echoed. "And what does this portrait of Lord Mière remind you of, if I may ask?"

"Honor, and those who lose it," he said. "Lord Mière was my great-grandfather."

Biantha blinked and saw that there was, indeed, a resemblance in the structure of his face. Her eyes moved to the tapestry's rust border. What had driven Mière to betrayal? It occurred to her, not for the first time, that she herself had fled the demon emperor's court — but the symmetry here seemed incomplete. "Do you think there's hope for us?" she asked the captain.

He spread his hands, studying Biantha's face as she had his just a moment before. "There are those who say we must have a chance, or you would have returned to the demons."

She felt herself flush — and then laughed, though that laughter came perilously close to tears. "I have rarely known demons to forgive. Neither have they forgiven Evergard their defeat in the Nightbreak War."

"More's the pity," said the captain, frowning thoughtfully, and took his leave.

For us or the demons? Biantha thought.

Symmetry. The word haunted Biantha through the days and nights as she struggled with the Prophecy. She had wondered, after meeting the

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captain, if it meant something as simple as her flight from the demons, the fact that one of Lord Mière's descendants survived here. The ballads said Mière had but a single daughter, named Paienne, but they made no mention of her after she saved the Watchlands.

The secret eluded her, slipped away from her, sent her into dreams where dizzying shifts in perspective finally drove her to awaken. Biantha turned to her tomes, seeking clues in others' mathemagical speculations; when she tired of that, she memorized her battle spells, bowing to the heartless logic of war. And went back to the tomes, their treasury of axioms and theorems, diagrams and discussions.

She was leafing through Athique's *Transformations* when someone imitated thunder on her door. Biantha put down the book and opened the door. "Yes?"

The herald bowed elaborately. "A meeting of the court, my lady. Lord Vathré wishes you to attend."

"I'll be there." Firmly, she shut the door and changed into her formal robes as swiftly as she could. Biantha had attended few court meetings: at first, because Vathré had still been uncertain of her loyalties, then because of her awkwardness as a foreigner, and finally because she rarely had anything to contribute to matters of state and found her time better spent working on her magic. That Vathré should summon her now was unusual.

She was right. For once the attendants and servants had been cleared out, and the court had arrayed itself along the sides of the throne room while Vathré and his advisers sat at the head. She took her place between the astrologer and Lady Iastre. The astrologer wore his habitual frown, while the lady's face was cool and composed, revealing nothing. Biantha knew better, after playing draughts or rithmomachia against Iastre once a week in less hectic times: Iastre's face only went blank when she anticipated trouble.

"We have a guest today," said Vathré at his driest. His eyes might have flicked to Biantha, too briefly for her to tell for certain.

On cue, the guards led in a man who wore black and red and gold, stripped of his sword — she knew there had been a sword, by the uniform. The style of his clothing spoke of the demons' realm, and the only one besides the emperor who dared appear in those colors was his champion. The emperor's champion, her son.

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A challenge? Biantha thought, clenching her hands so they would not shake. *Has Marten come to challenge Vathré*? But surely the emperor knew Evergard held different customs and would hardly surrender the Watchlands' fate to a duel's outcome.

Hopelessly, she studied the man who had so suddenly disrupted her memories of the child who hid flowers and leaves between the pages of her books, who climbed onto her desk to look out the window at the soldiers drilling. He had her pale hair, a face very like hers. His hands, relaxed at his sides, were also hers, though deadlier; Biantha knew of the training an emperor's champion underwent and had little faith that the guards could stop him from killing Vathré if he wished. But Marten's eyes belonged to a man Biantha had tried to forget, who had died attempting to keep her from leaving the palace with their child.

Silence descended upon the throne room. Vathré's court noted the resemblance, though Marten had yet to spot his mother. He looked straight ahead at Evergard's lord.

Vathré stood and drew the Blade Fidora from its sheath. It glimmered like crystal, like the first light of morning, like tears. The lords and ladies glanced at each other but did not set whispers spinning through the room. Biantha, too, kept silent: a word spoken false in the unsheathed sword's presence would cause it to weep or bleed; the magic had driven men and women mad, and no lord of Evergard used it lightly.

"I am trying to decide whether you are very thoughtless or very clever," Vathré said softly. "Who are you and why are you here?"

"I was the sword at the emperor's side," he answered, "and that sword was nameless." The pale-haired man closed his eyes, opened them. "My name is Marten. I came because the emperor has thousands of swords now, to do his bidding; and I no longer found that bidding to my taste."

Vathré glanced down at the Blade Fidora. Its color remained clear and true. "An interesting time to change your loyalties — if, indeed, they've changed. You might have found a better way to leave than by showing up *here* in full uniform, scaring the guards out of their wits."

"I left when the demons were...subduing a village," Marten said flatly. "I don't know the village's name. I hardly had time to find more suitable attire, my lord, and on campaign one dresses in uniform as a matter of course. To do otherwise would have aroused suspicion."

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"And you weren't afraid of being caught and killed on the spot?" one of the advisers demanded.

He shrugged. "I was taught three spells in my training. One allowed me to walk unharmed through the palace wards. One calls fire from blood. And the last lets me pass by like the dream of a ghost."

Biantha glanced at the Blade Fidora and its unwavering light.

Lady Iastre coughed. "Forgive me if I'm less well-informed than I ought to be," she said, "and slow to react as well — but you mentioned being 'on campaign.' Is this a common thing, that 'the sword at the emperor's side' should be out in the field?"

Marten's eyes moved toward the source of the voice, and so he caught sight of Biantha. He inhaled sharply. Biantha felt her face freeze, though she longed to smile at the stranger her son had become. *Answer*, she wished him. *Say you've come to me after so many years —*

Marten gathered himself and said, "I came to warn you, if nothing else; death is a price I have taken from many." His voice shook, but he continued to face Vathré squarely. "The demon emperor has come, and your battles will be the harder for it." Then the whispers began, and even Iastre cast troubled eyes toward Biantha; the light of the Blade Fidora reflected all the shades of fear, all the colors of despair, that were voiced. "Please," Marten said, raising his voice but slightly, "let me help. My lord, I may be slow in learning that there is more to war than following orders. That there are people who die for their homes or their families — "

"Families," Biantha repeated, tasting bitterness. So calm, his face, like polished metal. She felt Iastre's hand on her arm and forced a smile.

The whispers had died down, and Marten faltered. "I know how the emperor thinks," he said at last. "Let me help you there, my lord, or have me killed. Either way, you will have taken the emperor's champion from him."

So pale, his face, like Fidora's light. Biantha caught her breath, waiting for Vathré to speak.

Lines of strain etched the lord's face as he left the throne to stand before Marten. "Will you swear fealty to the Watchlands and their lord, then?"

Marten did not flinch. "Yes."

Yes, echoed Biantha, doubt biting her heart. She had not known, when

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she first came to Evergard, what powers the Blade Fidora possessed. A magician-smith had died in its forging, that there might never again be a traitor like Lord Mière. Vathré had questioned Biantha, as he had just questioned Marten, and the first part of the sword's virtue had been plain to her, a mirror of spoken minds.

Only later had Vathré told her the second part, that a false oath sworn upon the sword killed the oath-taker. Once an heir to Evergard had sworn guardianship to the Watchlands and their people and fallen dead. Once a weary soldier had woken Evergard's lady three hours before dawn to confess a betrayal planned, and then committed suicide. Biantha had no desire to find her son the subject of another story, another song. How had Paienne felt, she wondered suddenly, when her father's treachery became part of the Nightbreak War's history?

Marten laid his hand upon the glass-clear blade. "I swear it." Then, swallowing, he looked directly at Biantha.

She could not bring herself to trust him, even after the long years, when he wore a uniform like his father's. This time, she did turn away.

"There's something sinful," said Iastre, fingers running round and round a captured draughts piece, "in sitting here playing a game when our world is falling apart."

Biantha smiled uncertainly and considered her options. "If I stayed in my room and fretted about it all the time, I should go mad." She nudged one of her pieces to a new square, musing on how the symmetry of the game — red on black, black on black — had soon been spoiled by their moves.

"I hear it was Marten's planning that kept the demons from overrunning Silverbridge so far."

She looked up and saw Iastre's worried expression. "A good thing, I suppose — especially considering that the emperor now has a personal reason for wanting to humble the Watchlands."

"Surely you don't think he should have stayed in the emperor's service," Iastre protested.

Oh, but he did once, Biantha did not say. "It's your move."

A snort. "Don't change the subject on me now. You fled the emperor's palace, too, if you'll recall."

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"Too well," she agreed. She had slept poorly the first few years at Evergard, hearing danger in the footfalls that passed by her door and dreaming of the emperor's serpent-eyed scepter upon her own shoulder. "But I left in a time of peace, and as terrible a crime as I had committed, I was only a human mathemagician. Besides" — and Biantha drew in a shaky breath — "they knew they had my son: punishment enough."

Iastre shook her head and finally made her move. "He's here now, and he may be our only hope."

"That," she said, "is what worries me."

Even here, playing draughts, Biantha found no escape from Marten. She had spotted him once in the courtyard, sparring against Evergard's best soldiers while a healer and several enchanters looked on, lest the former champion seek a life instead of touch. At mealtimes in the great hall she took to eating at the far end of the high table; yet over the clinking glasses and silverware, the tense voices and rustling clothes, Biantha heard Marten and Vathré speaking easily with each other. Evergard's lord trusted Marten — they all trusted Marten now, while she dared not.

Like a pendulum, her thoughts swung between her son and Paienne, her son and Lord Mière. Late at night, when she walked the battlements listening vainly for the footfalls of marching soldiers, feeling betrayal's cold hand in every tremor of the wind, she remembered tales of the Nightbreak War. Biantha had never put much faith in the minstrels' embellished ballads, but the poetry preyed upon her fears.

Working with fragments of history and the military reports that came in daily, she attempted to map past onto future, battle onto battle...betrayal onto betrayal. And failed, over and over. And cursed the Prophecy, staring at the worn and inscrutable pages, alone in her room. It was during one of those bouts that a familiar knocking startled her from her work.

Marten? thought Biantha involuntarily. But she had learned the rhythm of Vathré's tread, and when she opened the door she knew who waited behind it. The twin edges of relief and disappointment cut her heart.

The gray-haired man looked her up and down, and scowled. "I thought you might be overworking yourself again."

She essayed a smile, stepping aside so he could enter. "Overwork, my lord? Tell that to the soldiers who train, and fight, and die for it, or see their friends die for it. Tell that to the cook or the servants in the keep."

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"There are ways and ways of work, my dear." He paced around the chamber, casting a curious eye over her bookcase and her cluttered desk, then rested a hand on her shoulder. "Perhaps I should come back later, when you've rested — and I do mean rest, not sitting in bed to read your books rather than sitting at your desk."

Biantha craned her head back to glance at him. "At least tell me why you came."

"Marten," he said bluntly, releasing her shoulder.

She flinched.

"You're hurting the boy," Vathré said. "He's been here quite a while and you haven't said a word to him."

She arched an eyebrow. "He's not the boy I left behind, my lord." Her voice nearly broke.

"I'm old enough to call *you* a girl, Lady Biantha. Don't quibble. Even I can't find cause to mistrust him, and the years have made me paranoid."

"Oh?" She ran her fingers over her copy of the Prophecy, worn smooth by years of on-and-off study. By all accounts, Marten's advice was sound — but the demons kept coming.

"I'm sending him to command at Silverbridge." Vathré shook his head. "We've held out as long as we can, but it looks like our efforts have been no more than a delaying action. I haven't told the council yet, but we're going to have to withdraw to Aultgard." He exhaled softly. "Marten will keep the demons occupied while the bulk of the army retreats."

Biantha stared at him.

"The soldiers are coming to trust him, you know," he remarked. "He's perhaps the best tactician Evergard has seen in the past couple generations, and I want to see if that trust is justified."

She closed her eyes and said, "A gamble, my lord. Wouldn't you do better to put someone else in charge?"

Vathré ignored her question. "I thought you should know before I announce it."

"Thank you, my lord." Biantha paused, then added, "Do you know where Marten might be at the moment?"

He smiled sadly. "Haunting the battlements, hoping you will stop by."

She bowed her head and, after he had left, went to search for her son.

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Biantha found him by the southern tower, a sword sheathed at his back. Even now it disconcerted her to see him in the dress of Evergard's soldiers, as if her mind refused to surrender that first image of Marten standing before the court in red and black and gold.

"Mother," he said, clasping his hands behind his back.

Slowly, reluctantly, she faced him. "I'm here."

Moonlight pooled in his eyes and glittered in the tears that streaked his face. "I remember," he said without accusation. "I was seven years old and you told me to pack. You were arguing with Father."

Biantha nodded. Marten had nearly reached the age where he would have to begin training as either a magician or a soldier, or forfeit what little protection his parents' status gave him. Over the years, as their son grew older, she spoke to her husband of leaving the demons' empire to seek refuge in the Watchlands or the realms further east. He always treated her kindly, without ever turning an eye to the courtesans — demon and human both — who served those the emperor favored.

Yet Biantha had never forgotten her husband's puzzlement, molting slowly into anger, that she should wish to leave a court that sheltered them, though it did nothing to shelter others. She could not reconcile herself to the demons' casual cruelty: One of the emperor's nieces sent, after an ill-advised duel, to redeem her honor by riding a horse to the mines of Sarmont and back, five days and back forcing a terrified beast to carry her. The pale-eyed assassin who had fallen from favor after killing the rebellious lady of Reis Keep, solely because he had left evidence of his work. Children drowned after a plague blinded them and clouded their wits. If nothing else, the demons were as cruel to each other as to the humans who lived among and below them, but Biantha had found less and less comfort in that knowledge.

"I stood in the doorway," Marten went on, "trying to understand. Then Father was weeping — "

She had said to her husband, *If you will not come, then I must go without you.*

" — and he drew his sword against you."

"And I killed him," Biantha said, dry-mouthed. "I tried to get you to come with me, but you wouldn't leave him. You started to cry. I had little time, and there were ever guards nearby, listening for anything amiss. So

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I went alone. It would have been my death to stay after murdering one of the emperor's officers. In the end, the emperor's trust meant more to him than you or I."

"Please don't leave me again," Marten whispered. He stood straight-backed in the darkness, the hilt of the sword at his back peering over his shoulder like a sleepy eye, but his face was taut. "I am leaving for Silverbridge tomorrow."

"Will you be at the forefront?"

"It would be unwise." His mouth tightened for a moment. "I will be giving orders."

"To kill." *And, perhaps, be killed,* she wanted to say, but the words fluttered in her throat.

Marten met her gaze calmly. "It is war, Mother."

"It is now," she agreed, "but it wasn't before. I know what it is to be the emperor's champion. 'The sword at the emperor's side,' you said. The others heard the words only; they have never lain awake and sleepless for memory of bloodstains on a pale rug, or because of the sudden, silenced cries at night. How many fell to your blade, Marten?"

"I came to follow you when I started losing count." His eyes were dry, now, though Biantha saw the shapes of pain stirring behind them. "When the numbers started slipping out of my grasp."

Biantha held silence before her like a skein of threads that wanted words to untangle it.

He lifted a hand, hesitated, let it drop. "I wanted to talk to you once, if never again. Before I go to Silverbridge where the demons await."

She smiled at him, then. But always the suspicion remained that he had some way of breaking his oath to Vathré, that the demon emperor had sent him to ensure the Watchlands' downfall through some subtle plan — or, more simply, that he had come to betray the mother he had abandoned, who had abandoned him; she no longer knew which.

"Go, then," said Biantha, neither promise nor peril in her voice, and left him to await dawn, alone.

Four days later, Biantha stood before her bookcase, eyes roaming aimlessly over her collection of mathemagical works, some in the tight, angular script of the demon empire, others in the ornate writing common

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to the Watchlands' scholars. *There has to be something useful,* she told herself, even after having scoured everything that looked remotely relevant. Now, more than ever, she wished she had talent for another of the magical disciplines, which did not rely on memorized proofs or the vagaries of inspiration, though none of them had ever seemed to get far with the Prophecy.

Would that it were a straightforward problem —

Biantha froze. The Prophecy did not describe the idealized spaces with which she had grown accustomed to dealing, but the tangles of truth, the interactions of demons and humans, the snarls of cause and effect and relation. Even the astrologer admitted privately that his predictions, on occasion, failed spectacularly where people were involved. She had been trying to linearize the cantos: the wrong approach.

Evergard's treasurer had once teased her about the cost of paper, though she took care to waste as little as possible. She located a pile of empty sheets in a drawer and set them on her desk, opening her copy of the Prophecy to the first page. After a moment, Biantha also retrieved Sarielle's *Speculations, Spells and Stranger Sets,* sparing a glance for the 400-line poem in the back; Sarielle of Rix had fancied herself a poet. She had passed evenings lingering over the book's carefully engraved figures and diagrams, curves that Sarielle had labeled "pathological" for their peculiarities.

Symmetry. That which remained changeless. Red pieces upon black and black upon black at the start of a draughts match. A ballad that began and ended with the same sequence of measures; and now that Biantha turned her thoughts in this direction, she remembered a song that traveling minstrels had performed before the court, voice after voice braiding into a whole that imitated each part. Her image in the mirror. And now, Sarielle's pathological curves, where a segment of the proper proportion spawned yet more such segments.

Methodically, she went through the Prophecy, searching for these other symmetries, for the solution that had eluded her for so long. Late into the night, throat parched because she had drained her pitcher and dared not break her concentration by fetching another or calling a servant, Biantha placed *Speculations, Spells and Stranger Sets* to one side and thumbed through the appendix to Athique's *Infinities.* Athique and

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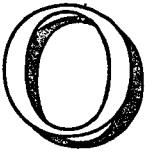
Sarielle, contemporaries, had been opposites as far as titles went. She reached the approximations of various shapes, sieves and flowers, ferns and laces, that no mortal hand could craft.

One page in particular struck her: shapes built from varying polygons and with various "pathologies," as Athique dubbed them in what Biantha suspected had been a jab at Sarielle's would-be wordsmithing, repeating a procedure to the borders of infinity. The Prophecy harbored greater complexities, but she wondered if her solution might be one of many algorithms, many possibilities. Her eyes flooded: a lifetime's work that she had uncovered, explored briefly by mathemagicians before her, and she had little time in which to seek a solution that helped the Watchlands.

Even after she had snuffed the lamp and curled into bed, a headache devouring her brain, words still burned before her eyes: *Symmetry. Pathologies. Infinity.*



NLY A FEW weeks later, Biantha found herself walking aimlessly down a corridor, freeing her mind from the Prophecy's tyrannous grip, when Lady Iastre shook her shoulder. "They're back, Biantha," she said hurriedly. "I thought you'd like to be there to greet them."

"Who's back?"

"Your son. And those who survived Silverbridge."

Those who survived. Biantha closed her eyes, shaking. "If only the demons would leave us alone — "

The other woman nodded sadly. "But it's not happening. The Emperor will soon be at Evergard itself, is the news I've been hearing. Come on."

"I can't," she said, and felt as though the keep were spinning around her while pitiless eyes peered through the walls. "Tell him — tell Marten — I'm glad he's back." It was all she could think to say, a message for her son — a message that she would not deliver in person, because the urgency of the situation had jarred her thoughts back to the Prophecy.

"Biantha!" Iastre cried, too late to stop her.

In bits and pieces she learned the rest of the story, by eavesdropping benignly on dinner conversations and the servants' gossip. The emperor had indeed forsaken his court for the battlefield, perhaps because of

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Evergard's stubborn resistance. None of this surprised her, except when a curly-haired herald mentioned the serpent-eyed scepter. To her knowledge that scepter had never left the empire — unless, and the thought sickened her, the demons had begun to consider Evergard part of their empire. It had turned Silverbridge, the shining bridge of ballad, into rust and tarnish, and even now the demons advanced.

Vathré gave a few permission to flee further east with their families, those whose presence mattered little to the coming siege. Others prepared to fight, or die, or both; the mock-battles that Biantha sometimes watched between the guards grew more grim, more intent. She and Iastre agreed that the time for draughts and rithmomachia had passed, as much as she would have welcomed the distraction.

As for Marten — she saw almost nothing of him except the terrible weariness that had taken up residence in his face, as though he had survived a torture past bearing. Biantha grieved for him as a mother; as a mathemagician, she had no comfort to offer; for her own helplessness threatened to overwhelm her. Perhaps he in his turn sensed this, and left her alone.

Day by day the demons came closer, to the point where she could stand on the battlements and see the baleful lights in the distance: the orange of campfires, the gold and silver of magefires. Day by day the discussions grew more frantic, more resigned.

At last, one morning, the horns blazed high and clear through the air, and the siege of Evergard began. Biantha took her place on the parapets without saying any farewells, though some had been said to her, and watched while archers fired into the demons' massed ranks. Not long after, magefire rolled over their hastily raised shields, and she prepared her own spells. Only when the demons began to draw back and prepare a second attack did she call upon powers that required meticulous proofs, held in her mind like the memory of a favorite song — or a child in her arms.

She gathered all the shapes of pain that afflicted the demons and twisted them into death. Red mists obscured her vision as the spell wrenched her own soul, sparing her the need to watch the enemy falling. Yet she would have to use the spell again and again before the demons' mathemagicians shaped a ward against it. Those who shared her art rarely

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ventured into battle, for this reason: it often took too long to create attacks or adapt to them. A theorem needed for a spell might take years to discover, or turn out to be impossible; and inspiration, while swift, was sometimes unreliable. She had seen mathemagicians die from careless assumptions in spellcasting.

By midday Biantha no longer noticed the newly fallen corpses. She leaned against the wall's cold stone — and glimpsed black and red and gold in the distance: the demon emperor, carrying the serpent-eyed scepter that she remembered too clearly. For a moment she thought of the Blade Fidora and cursed the Prophecy's inscrutable symmetry. "No," she whispered. Only if the emperor were certain of victory would he risk himself in the front lines, and a cold conviction froze her thoughts.

Marten. He's counting on Marten to help him.

She had to find Vathré and warn him. She knew where he would be and ran, despite the archers' protests that she endangered herself. "My lord!" she cried, grieving already, because she saw her fair-haired son beside gray-haired Vathré, directing the defense. "My lord! The emperor — " Biantha nearly tripped, caught herself, continued running.

Vathré turned, trusting her, and then it happened.

The emperor raised his scepter, and darkness welled forth to batter Evergard's walls. In the darkness, colors moved like the fire of dancing prisms; silence reigned for a second, strangely disturbing after the clamor of war. Then the Emperor's spell ended, leaving behind more dead than the eye could count at a glance. Broken shapes, blood, weapons twisted into deadly metal flowers, a wind like the breath of disease.

Biantha stared disbelievingly over the destruction and saw that the demons who had stood in the spell's path had died as well; saw that the emperor had come forward to spare his own soldiers, not — she hoped not — because he knew he had a traitor in the Watchlanders' ranks. So much death, and all they had been able to do, she and the other magicians, was watch.

"Mercy," Vathré breathed.

"The scepter," Marten said harshly. "Its unspoken name is Decay."

She looked across at the gates and sneezed, dust stinging her nostrils. Already those who had fallen were rotting, flesh blackening and curling to reveal bone; Evergard's sturdy walls had become cracked and mottled.

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Marten was shouting orders for everyone to abandon that section of wall before it crumbled. Then he looked at her and said, "We have to get down. Before it spreads. You too, my lord."

Vathré nodded curtly and offered Biantha his arm; Marten led the way down, across footing made newly treacherous. The walls whispered dryly behind them; she flinched at the crash as a crenel broke off and plummeted.

" — use that scepter again?" she heard the lord asking Marten as she concentrated on her footing.

"No," she and her son both said. Biantha continued, "Not so far from the seat of his power and without the blood sacrifices. Not against wood or stone. But a touch, against living flesh, is another matter."

They had reached safety of sorts with the others who had fled the crumbling section of wall. "What of the Prophecy?" Vathré asked her, grimacing as he cast his gaze over the morning's carnage.

"Prophecy?" Marten repeated, looking at them strangely.

Perhaps he had not heard, or failed to understand what he heard, in the brief time he had been at Evergard. Biantha doubted he had spent much time with the minstrels. At least he was not — she prayed not — a traitor, as she had thought at first. Breath coming hard, she looked around, listened to the cries of the wounded, and then, all at once, the answer came to her, one solution of several.

Perspective. Time and again she had brooded over the Prophecy and the second war it foretold. *The rhymes, the rhythms, the ambiguities*, she had said to Vathré not long ago. She had thought about the strange symmetry, the Nightbreak War's traitor — but failed to consider that, in the Prophecy's second war, the corresponding traitor might betray the demons. The demons, not the Watchlands.

Last time, Lord Mière had betrayed the Watchlands, and died at Paienne's hand — father and daughter, while Biantha and Marten were mother and son. But the mirror was imperfect, as the twisted symmetry already showed her. Marten did not have to die, and there was still hope for victory.

"The emperor is still down there," said Vathré quietly. "It seems that if someone were to stop him, we could hold the keep. Hold the keep, and have a chance of winning."

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"A challenge," Biantha breathed, hardly aware that those around them were listening avidly, for on this hung Evergard's fate. "Challenge the emperor. He has his honor, strange as it may seem to us. He lost his champion; will he turn down an opportunity to slay, or be slain by, that champion?"

Had there been such a challenge in the Nightbreak War? The ballads, the histories, failed to say. No matter. They were not living a ballad, but writing their own lines to the song.

Vathré nodded, seeing the sense in her words; after all, she had lived in the demons' realm. Then he unfastened the sheath of his sword from his belt and held it out to Marten. "Take the sword," he said.

If she was wrong, giving the Blade Fidora to him was unrivaled folly. But they no longer had a choice, if they meant to take advantage of the Prophecy's tangled possibilities.

He blanched. "I can't. I don't even know who the heir is — " probably because Vathré *still* had not declared the succession. "I haven't the right."

Biantha gazed at the gates, now twisted into rusty skeins. The captain of the guard had rallied the remaining troops and was grimly awaiting the demons' advance.

The lord of Evergard said, exasperated, "I *give* you the right. This isn't the time for questions or self-recriminations. *Take the sword.*"

Resolutely, Marten accepted the Blade Fidora. He grasped the sword's hilt, and it came clear of the scabbard, shining faintly. "I'm sorry for what I have done in the past," he whispered, "even though that doesn't change what was done. Help me now."

"Hurry," said Biantha, guessing the battle's shape. "The emperor will soon come to claim his prize, *our* home, and you must be there to stop him." She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek: a mother's kiss, which she had not given him for too many years. She called to mind every protective spell she could think of and forged them together around him despite her exhaustion. "Go with my blessing." *And please come back to me.* After losing him once, Biantha did not mean to lose him again.

"And go with mine," Vathré echoed.

He ducked his head and moved away at a run. Shivering, Biantha tried to gather the strength for more magic against the demons, to influence the

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Prophecy in their favor. She felt as if she were a formula in an old book, a creature of faded ink and yellowed paper.

As she and Vathré watched, Marten shoved through the soldiers at the gate, pausing only to exchange a few words with some of his comrades. They parted for him, wondering that he and not Vathré held the Blade Fidora; Vathré waved at them in reassurance. Past the gates were the emperor and his elites, dressed in rich colors, standing in near-perfect formation.

"Traitor," said the emperor to Marten in the cool voice that never revealed anything but mockery; demon and human both strained to hear him. "Do you think Evergard's blade will protect you?"

In answer Marten swung the sword toward the emperor's exposed throat, where veins showed golden through the translucent skin. The elites reacted by moving to surround him while the emperor brought his serpent-eyed scepter up in a parry. The soldiers of Evergard, in their turn, advanced in Marten's defense. Biantha felt a hysterical laugh forming: the soldiers of both sides looked as though they had choreographed their motions, like dancers.

Now, straining to see what was happening, she realized why the emperor had chosen her son for his champion. Several of the elites saw clearly the blows that would kill them, yet failed to counter in time. Yet her eyes were drawn to the emperor himself, and she sucked in her breath: the emperor appeared to be aiming at a woman who had crippled one of the elites, but Biantha saw the twist in the scepter's trajectory that would bring it around to strike Marten. Even a traitor champion could not survive a single touch of the scepter; it would weaken him beyond his ability to recover.

"Marten!" she screamed. He was all she had left of her old home and its decadent intrigues; of a man with gentle hands who had loved her within the narrow limits of court life; of her family. The emperor had stolen him from her for so long —

Mathemagical intuition launched her past the meticulous lemmas and lines of a proof, panic giving her thoughts a hawk's wings. Biantha spun one more spell. Symmetry: the emperor's attack became Marten's, in spaces too strange for the mind to imagine. The Blade Fidora went true to its target, while the scepter missed entirely, and it was the emperor's golden blood that showered Marten's hands.

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I'm sorry for everything, Marten, thought Biantha, and folded out of consciousness.

The minstrels who survived the Siege of Evergard made into song the deaths, the desperation, the duel between the demon emperor and he who was now heir to the Watchlands. Biantha, for her part, listened and grieved in her own way for those who had died...for Mière's great-grandson. There was more to any story, she had learned, than what the minstrels remembered; and this was as true of herself, her husband, her son.

Biantha wrote only two lines in the margin of an unfinished book — a book of her own theorems.

There are too many shapes of love to be counted.
One of them is forgiveness.

It was a conjecture, not a proof, but Biantha knew its truth nonetheless. After the ink had dried, she left her room with its well-worn books and went to the great hall where Vathré and Iastre, and most especially Marten, expected her for dinner.

—for Ch'mera, and for those who teach math

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Sooterkin, by Tom Gilling, Viking, 1999, $23.95.

I HAVE TO admit something. Often the strange and off-the-beaten-path books I find and write about in this column (and that some readers thank me for bringing to their attention) come from my stumbling across them in a bookstore or elsewhere all on my own. But the esteemed editor of this very magazine brings a good number of them to my attention as well. I'm not quite sure where *he* finds them, but every month or so, some unannounced treasure will show up in my post office box bearing his return address. For this, I — and those aforementioned readers — are quite grateful.

The latest addition to those ranks is the book in hand.

Set in the winter of 1821 in the penal colony of Van Dieman's Land (now known as Tasmania), it's an odd story that centers around a convict woman named Sarah Dyer who gives birth to a seal pup. But for the most part, the focus isn't directly on either Dyer or the seal child who is given the name of Arthur. Far more of the book deals with a quirky cast of misfit characters who all interact at one point or another with the Dyer family.

There's the alcoholic vicar, Reverend Mr. Kidney, a hero in the movie of his own mind, who spends far more time scheming up ways to get money, free meals, and drinks than he does looking after his flock. Or the self-taught scientist Mr. Sculley with his interests in physiognomy (the study of faces), as well as experiments such as trying to hatch goose eggs in a kangaroo's pouch. Or the fastidious American doctor, Benjamin Banes, who hopes to bring the seal pup back to the States as a sideshow attraction.

But the Dyers and Arthur do have their part to play in the story. Sculley is certain the pup is a

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sooterkin, a harelike goblinish creature apparently born in centuries past to a number of Dutch women. Others consider the creature either godless or a hoax. That is, until they discover Arthur can sing. His mother immediately puts him "on stage" in their house, performing a show with his human brother Ned, until poor Arthur is kidnapped.

The story travels here and there — not exactly a straightforward narrative, but nonetheless a fascinating one. Gilling's prose is evocative throughout and both the setting and characters, however much caricatured they might be, remain vivid and intriguing.

Speaking of characters, there aren't any particularly likable ones, except for Ned, who is onstage less than he could be. Normally that would bother me (I prefer to spend my reading time in the company of at least one fictional character I like), but it's a short book and Gilling hits all the right notes throughout the rest of his story.

As a side note, for those interested in shapeshifting seal stories (of which there isn't much in this book besides the premise of the pup born to a human woman), you might want to track down a copy of the 1965 book, *The People of the Seal: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend* by David Thomson for a collection of more traditional selchie stories and songs (including notation for some of the tunes).

The Faeries' Oracle, by Brian Froud, with Jessica Macbeth, Fireside, 2000, with 66 full-color cards, $25.

Gnomes in the Garden, by David & Carol Swing, Writer's Showcase, 2000, $13.95.

I have before me a pair of nonfiction books that will either stretch your credulity to the breaking point, or that you will welcome with some form of "Ah, ha! Other people understand."

Brian Froud should already be well-known to many of you for his distinctive and wonderful artwork, usually depicting some denizen of Faery. These images have appeared on everything from posters and book covers to interior illustrations, T-shirts, and tattoos, and have been shamelessly copied by any number of artists without his singular vision. (Unless they, too, as Froud says he does, are painting from life.)

I don't doubt that when most of us consider faeries and goblins and the like these days, we visualize

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them as they've appeared in Froud's work, rather than that of the great illustrators of fairy tale books such as Arthur Rackham, W. Heath Robinson, or even Cicely Mary Barker. So Froud is a perfect choice for a project of this kind.

The art is gorgeous, whether it be the monochrome sketches dotted amidst the text of the book, or the full color paintings that appear on each card. If faeries don't look like this, they should: ethereal and earthy, sometimes no more than flares of magical light, other times so finely detailed you can count the hairs on their heads.

But rather than providing a showcase for Froud's talent, the art is here to illustrate an oracle: something like a Tarot with cards and various layouts, only rather than working with archetypes and intellectual concepts, the aim here is to connect the reader with the various helpful faeries who are depicted on the cards.

Why these faeries? As Froud put it in a recent interview, "Some wanted to be in, some didn't want to be in, and some kept changing their minds. Eventually everyone came to an agreement."

Later in that same interview, Froud explains "that faeries are the personification of the soul of nature and the world. As we are very much a part of nature and the world, we are therefore communicating with our own souls.... It is all about connection: connecting with the world and yourself." Jessica Macbeth's text is free of hyperbole and explains all of this in greater detail. She also provides the practical explanations needed for hands-on use of the cards, as well as descriptions for each of them. All in all, it's a lovely package for anyone interested in various forms of divination, though as Macbeth points out in her text, any futures you might see are only possible ones, because we all have free will.

David and Carol Swing's book takes an entirely different tack to the idea of beings from Faery wanting to communicate with us.

It could have used a Froud cover, or even more appropriately, one by Rien Poortvliet, as it chronicles the authors' firsthand experience with a number of gnomes who have chosen the pair to write down their stories. Most of the book is made up of the gnomes' histories, folklore, and spiritual matter, all of it coming together in a curious mix of what the authors call Celtic Christian teachings.

There's a bit of a lecturing tone throughout, and it doesn't help that

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all the various faery beings blend together, speaking with the same voice. The prose in general is practical and plainspoken. I get the impression that this is a self-published affair, or at least coming from a vanity press imprint. But there's nothing wrong with that. The stories are still compelling, the authors are certainly earnest, and if they did decide to self-publish, at least it got the material out there where it can be read.

Are either of these books really nonfiction? I have no idea. I think that's up to each reader to decide for him or herself. But they were certainly interesting.

Journeyman: The Art of Chris Moore, by Stephen Gallagher, Paper Tiger, 2001, $29.95.

Mass: The Art of John Harris, by Ron Tiner, Paper Tiger, 2001, $29.95.

Hard sf art usually doesn't interest me much more than hard sf fiction does. But I think the real reason for this has less to do with my likes or dislikes than it does a matter of time. I only have so much of it, so I tend to spend it on things I know I'm going to enjoy (there already being so much of it that I can't begin to experience it all) instead of what I think I won't. Yet when I do take the time to read, say, Greg Bear, or Joe Haldeman, I'm often just as transfixed as I am reading anything else of a similar quality in a different genre.

The same, it appears, goes for art.

I was attracted to the Chris Moore book because the text is by Stephen Gallagher—a British writer who's been a longtime favorite of mine. And I liked the way the book is set up: It's basically one long interview—perhaps more of a conversation—between Gallagher and the artist. Drawn into the story of their conversation, I found myself paying a different kind of attention to the art.

Yes, it's slick: a lot of air brushing, spacecraft, and shiny people. But the sense of design is tremendous and the more I studied the reproductions of the paintings, the more I began to appreciate them. The images are dramatic, smart, funny, evocative...whatever is required to convey the idea of a book through its cover art. Moore is a master of the fascinating perspective, and each of these paintings not only promotes the book it was commissioned for, but tells a story in its own right.

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By the time I got to the end, Moore's ideas, personality, and art had turned me into a convert.

The text of Harris's book wasn't as interesting to me — perhaps because I got so spoiled by that book-length interview in Moore's. But it does have the one thing the Moore volume lacks, and that's a longish section on the development of various pieces with lots of preliminary sketches and studies — one of my favorite things to find in an art book. Harris's images have a somewhat more painterly quality than Moore's — you can really see the brushwork in a lot of them — and the scope of the subject matter is wonderfully large: huge vistas, enormous floating cities, impossibly tall buildings. The inclusion of some real-world landscapes (India, New Mexico, etc.) show that he's able to bring this same sense of immensity and vast distance to what one might consider to be more mundane settings.

Both books come from the British Paper Tiger imprint (which recently expanded into the U.S.) and, as is usual with books they publish, the production values are superb.

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So...two pleasant surprises and what does it tell me? To continue to broaden my horizons in what I think I will like.

Now if I could only find more time....

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Pop Goes Tomorrow

The Pickup Artist, by Terry Bisson, Tor Books, 2001, $22.95.

The Wooden Sea, by Jonathan Carroll, Tor Books, 2001, $23.95.

TIME WAS, not so long ago, when a dystopic Future was a scarily enticing precinct, to be entered warily and carefully armed, or at least fashionably dressed: think of the methamphetamine dreamscapes of writers like William Gibson, Samuel R. Delany, Geoff Ryman, Philip K. Dick, Jonathan Lethem, Angela Carter, M. John Harrison.

These days, however, Tomorrowland is just as often designed for merely satirical effect. Near-future novels like Melvin Burkiet's tragicomic horrorshow *Signs and Wonders*, Bruce Sterling's *Zeitgeist*, or Jack Womack's *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* take the tropes and misanthropes of contemporary culture and play them mostly for laughs — nervous laughter, in the case of Burkiet's black novel, more complacent sniggers of recognition in Sterling's. Part of this is due to the fact that in pop culture the future has been colonized — suburbanized, really — just as effectively as the present, and with as deleterious a fallout on niche cultures, endangered species, and The Natural Phenomena Formerly Known As Wilderness. The complex (and, to use a bad word these days, literary) process of worldbuilding, with its laboriously constructed strata of detail — anthropological, sociological, technological and architectural — has been replaced by an iconographic shorthand. In mainstream fiction, the recitation of brand names and URLs supplants the rigors of characterization and style. Even in science fiction, original eidolons of Eden and anti-Eden —

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Utopia, Bellona, cyberspace, Nerewhon, Arrakis, Viriconia, Mars — have too often been replaced by ready-made, immediately recognizable symbols of the same, McEvil Empires (see how easy it is to fall into this trap?) like Disneyland and Las Vegas and McDonald's and Microsoft.

It's hard not to play these for laughs, though the symbols do lend themselves to chills: John Wayne Gacey = Stephen King's Penny-farthing = Ronald McDonald. The nightmarish Disneyland finale of Burkiet's *Signs and Wonders* manages to escape the pitfalls of satire. So does the extended pop culture auto-da-fé of Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, a book I thought a great deal about while reading Terry Bisson's new novel, *The Pickup Artist*. For protagonists, both books have innocent young men journeying west from New York into an increasingly entropic American landscape. Both revel, and often wallow, in the physical detritus of American consumerism. Both showcase characters drawn from the Major Arcana of Twentieth-Century American icons — Elvis and the Colonel, Greta Garbo and Charles Manson, Bill Gates and Hank Williams. Both, coincidentally or not, feature the husk of an ancient, self-defining Movie Star in a central role — Carter's Tristesse, Bisson's Damaris.

But Carter had the advantage of publishing *The Passion of New Eve* in 1977, when the notion of a country corrosively irradiated by its own popular culture may not have been fresh, but it had yet to become the family-ready fare of iMac commercials. Bisson has a longer, older row of pop corn to reduce to ashes, and he does a pretty thorough job of doing so.

The adventures of Hank Shapiro, the naive federal employee who narrates *The Pickup Artist*, begin in Staten Island and end in Las Vegas. Again, it's probably not Bisson's fault that one can predict his novel's trajectory from these bare facts, but here the unraveling of plot is less crucial to the pleasures of a story than its bleakly comic gloss. Shapiro is a pickup artist, a low-level employee of the Bureau of Arts and Entertainment whose job it is to go door to door, like a census worker, and collect illegal cultural artifacts. It seems that our present glut of information and junk is nothing: a few years from now, the vast weight of centuries of Art, and especially the vast weight of Twentieth-Century Art (or crap, whatever you want to call

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it) threatens to crush both the world's storage capacity and the creative fervor of living artists. Loosely allied groups of terrorists known as Alexandrians ("for the fire, not the library") bomb museums; innocent lives are shed.

And so the BAE was established to purge the world of excess art. (*Hey, not a bad idea!* you think, recalling that Jeff Koons polychrome sculpture of Michael Jackson.) The cutoff birthdates are the mid-nineteenth century for visual artists and 1899 for writers, musicians, songwriters. Each month the BAE randomly selects twelve hundred individuals whose works are to be relegated to that Great Dumpster in the Sky. All digital references to an artist are deleted, and any physical works — books, videos, vinyl, sculptures, paintings — are collected by pickup artists like Shapiro and subsequently destroyed.

Shapiro is a nice guy who does his job competently and with sympathy for those he visits, collecting their old Grishams and Harrison Ford videos. He's in Deletion, not Enforcement; he doesn't report forgotten copies of *Bonnie and Clyde*, and he's generous in doling out bonuses for old paperbacks. But he's a straight arrow, which makes him particularly vulnerable to seduction when it finally comes, in the guise of a vinyl recording of Hank Williams. Shapiro's fall from grace starts when he doesn't turn the record in to the authorities — but before he has a chance to purchase a bootleg record player, the album is snatched, and the chase begins.

The Hank Williams album is a Maguffin in the purest sense, and the motley characters in *The Pickup Artist* move swiftly in its pursuit. Shapiro is joined by his dying dog, Homer; Henrietta, a librarian who's used drugs to keep from giving birth to the child she's been pregnant with for nearly a decade; the corpse of a clone named Indian Bob, "one of seventy-seven Robert Lightfoots...cloned in an attempt to preserve the full-blooded Native American population." Indian Bob and his kin all run smalltime casinos and cheesy trading posts; they were part of a lost archaic New Jersey community, until the Ethnicity Act provided them with a historian and an archaeologist.

The Indian Bobs are just one strand in a complex braid of running jokes that spirals through *The Pickup Artist* like a demented strand of DNA. There's the history of the Alexandrian movement itself, told in alternating chapters, as well as descriptions of horrifically hilarious

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new drugs. (My favorite of these was Dig: people ingest it and proceed to dig manically through the immense trash middens where all the refuse and treasures of Bisson's future world lie hidden.)

As they travel west, Shapiro's weird little family grows — Henry gives birth to a homunculus who speaks in monosyllables, notably the word "Yup," and the tiny electronic bug set in pursuit of Shapiro falls in love with him. They finally reach Las Vegas, the closest this deracinated world gets to an Emerald City, where an enigmatic tycoon named Mr. Bill stands in for the Wizard, and the wizened movie star Damaris stands guard over another corpse. By story's end there are more corpses, more fires; but before the glowing dust has a chance to settle Shapiro and his little band are poised to continue west once more. It's a tribute to Bisson's power as a novelist that his grotesque creations are ultimately endearing as well as clever. Would I follow them on to California? Yup.

The Wooden Sea is another novel seamed with pop culture, though Jonathan Carroll's take on our world is at once more nostalgic and more hopeful. His hero, Frannie McCabe, is also a public servant — a small town cop, the police chief of Crane's View, the fictional Westchester County village he terrorized as a teenager. Frannie — who first appeared in Carroll's 1998 *Kissing the Beehive* — has grown up to be a good guy, middle-aged and happily married. He's a sucker for lost souls — a three-legged stray dog, the town idiot — the kind of cop who happily still exists, maybe even in Westchester.

Like all good guys, he's headed for a fall. It comes when the three-legged dog, Old Vertue, dies on him and Frannie dutifully hauls the body off to bury it himself in the woods. Old Vertue stays dead, but he won't stay buried: he shows up again in the trunk of Frannie's car. From this inexplicable event, *The Wooden Sea* cascades into a shimmering, often brilliant shower of strange and beautiful set pieces. Frannie's self-destructive teenage self appears, and not only moves in with Frannie but falls in love with his stepdaughter. A high school honors student dies of a heroin overdose; when Frannie is called to the death scene, he finds that her notebook is filled with eerie drawings that presage the bizarre events in his own life. Aliens appear, whose interest in Frannie is benign but not necessarily in his best interest. In

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an effort to aid them, he ends up meeting not just his past selves but his future self as well, sometimes all at the same time, and his hometown of Crane's View — past, present, future — flashes by him like the images in a child's flip book.

Carroll has a remarkable ability to reproduce the clarity and lucidity of one of those dreams that make perfect sense while you are asleep, but which defy any attempt at logic once awake. His gift for the everyday is extraordinary, too, as well as his powerful evocation of complex characters grappling with issues as disparate as time travel and their own mortality. In Carroll's hands, small details of pop culture become the grace notes that define a world and that world's passing, underscoring G. K. Chesterton's observation that "what is loved becomes *immediately* what can be lost."

> A teenage girl overdoses on heroin but what flattens you are her socks with white hearts on them. A man wraps his silver car around a tree killing him and his whole family, but what makes it unforgettable is that that song you love, "Sally Go Round the Roses," is still playing on the radio in the wreck when you get to it. A blue New York Mets baseball cap spotted with blood on a living room floor, the scorched family cat in the yard of the burnt house.... These are what you remember...

The Wooden Sea is in many ways an extended litany — liturgy, almost — of what Frannie McCabe remembers. Each encounter with his adolescent and, later, even younger self summons a Proustian recall of the world those earlier Frannies inhabited. His father, "Mr. Drip Dry, cap-toed oxford shoes from Florsheim, Robert Hall suit, one whiskey before dinner and never more." The local movie theater; a vintage Briggs and Stratton lawnmower; even the menus in a diner, "turquoise with thick gold lettering...stuck behind each jukebox selector down the counter" — middle-aged Frannie relishes them all, with that intensity usually reserved for deathbed visions. But Frannie isn't sentimental. He remembers exactly how much of an asshole the young Frannie was, and nothing can mitigate his horror at confronting his seventy-something self in a future Vienna — "Had I changed into an old golfer? Shriveled

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hands, Hush Puppies, and red pants? Holy shit!"

Ultimately, the aliens and their need for Frannie's help is less involving than Frannie's own delight and regret at facing *all* of his selves — the good, the bad, the just plain crummy. There are a few serious omissions to Carroll's litany of Westchester's past pleasures — Zagnuts but not Clark Bars? Claude Kirschner but not Sandy Becker? Not to mention that many of the once-small towns between Dobbs Ferry and Goldens Bridge have been destroyed by teardowns and the construction of the ubiquitous McMansions. A middle-income guy like Frannie McCabe might not recognize the old neighborhood, let alone live in it.

The Wooden Sea ends as it began, with clods of earth being shoveled into a grave. It's a melancholy, moving meditation on age, the inevitability of change, and the wisdom of acceptance in the face of death, "*the* most frightening word in the human vocabulary." "After a heavy rain the world is different for a while," Frannie muses at one point. After reading one of Jonathan Carroll's novels, the world is different, too.

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Jack Dann is the author of such novels as The Silent, The Man Who Melted, *and* The Memory Cathedral. *He lives nowadays in Melbourne, Australia, and notes that* Dreaming Down-Under, *the award-winning anthology of Australian sf and fantasy he coedited with his wife Janeen Webb, has recently been published in the US. His novel* Counting Coup *will soon follow suit. Currently he is working on a novel entitled* Second Chance.

Here we bring you a wonderful period piece that pays tribute to F. Scott Fitzgerald while also veering off into a far different direction.

The Diamond Pit

By Jack Dann

Homage to F. Scott...

I'd be flyin' to find!
My Miss One-of-a-kind!
If I could only get —
If only I could get —
out'a this jail!...
— "Rumplemayer's Basement Blues," 1921

One

IT WAS LIKE BEING IN A storm, except I heard the thunder first. That was the sound of a dozen anti-aircraft guns firing at us from the summit of a sheer butte that rose like a monolith above the cruel curls of the Montana Rockies.

The setting sun was wreathed with gauzy clouds, and it tinted the cliffs and crevasses below as pink as stained glass flamingos. We were

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flying a British Moth with a 60-hp de Havilland motor — those Brits could certainly make an airplane. The Moth was steady as a table and was Joel's and my favorite for wing walking and stepping off from one plane onto another. I was in the front cockpit this time, just along for the ride. It had been Joel's idea to borrow the boss's beaut and skip out after our last performance to investigate "something goofy" in the mountains near Hades, which was more bare rock than a village set in the saddle between a mountain that looked like a two-knuckled fist and the mountain that was shooting bullets at us.

Joel swore and shouted though the communication tube and tried to get us the hell out of there, as bullets tore into the fuselage. Another burst hit the upper wing just above my head, which was where the fuel tank was located. My face was spattered with gasoline and I figured then and there that I had just bought the farm; Joel was shouting through the tube to tell me that everything was okay — when we were hit again.

I heard a ping as a bullet hit the motor, and an instant later I could barely see through the oily smoke and fire. I gagged on the burnt exhalations of fuel and oil that smeared over my goggles as the Moth went into a dive. Reflexively, I took over the controls, which were linked to the front cockpit, God bless Mr. Geoffrey de Havilland. I shouted back at Joel through the tube and pulled as hard as I could on the stick while working the rudder and aileron pedals. The compass was going all wacky, as though someone was playing over it with a magnet, pulling the needle this way and that. Although I couldn't see Joel, I *knew* that he had been hit. Another wave of heat swept over me and I figured I'd be lucky to have another few seconds before the fuel tank blew Joel and me right out of the postcard pink and purple sky.

I'd always wondered what I'd be thinking about in my last moments. I'd wondered about it every time I climbed into a Spad during Bloody April of 1917; I could fly as well as most anybody, although I was no Rickenbacker. I had figured I was going to get it in '17 or '18, but I never even took a bullet, not a scratch — I had the proverbial angel on my wing — and now here I was, about to get it in 1923, which was *supposed* to be the best year of my life. I remembered Dr. Coué's prayer, which everyone was saying: "Day by day in every way I am getting better and better."

Better and better.

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"Joel," I shouted through the tube, "you're going to be okay. We're going to be okay." *Day by day in every fucking way,* and I felt that hot, sweaty tightness all over my face like I always do when I'm going to cry, but I slipped out of that because the old girl was making a whining keening sort of a noise, and then the motor sputtered and everything became summer afternoon quiet, except for the snapping of the wing wires....

And I found myself counting, counting slowly and the ground spun through the smoke, and I kept the nose up as the valley floor rose like an elevator the size of Manhattan, and I wasn't thinking about anything, not about dying or the tank exploding or the smoke or the smell of the oil...or my Mother, or Lisa, whom I had only dated twice, but she had gone down on the first date and said she loved me, and she had so many freckles, and three curly black hairs between her breasts, I remembered those three black hairs as I counted and by one-hundred-and-forty-seven I expected the giant hand of God to slap me right into the canyon floor and the fuel tank to explode like the sun and —

IT WAS DARK when they found me, but the moon was so big and bloated that everything looked like it was coated with silvery dust, except the shadows, where the moon dust couldn't settle. I don't know whether they woke me or whether it was the drip from the fuel tank, but once I realized I was alive and that this was certainly not heaven, I felt most every part of my body begin to ache. I moved my legs to make sure I still had them, and I tried to swat at the Negroes who were pulling me out of the cockpit. I don't know what was in my head because they were big men, and I was just swatting away, but they didn't throw me about or mistreat me or ask me any questions; it was as if they were just handling a fragile piece of merchandise, nothing that was alive, just merchandise. I started coughing as soon as they moved me, and I craned my neck for one last look at the plane...and at Joel, the poor dumb jake who just had to see if the stories were true about a grand castle on the mountain. Now Joel was dead, his face shot off, and I was being carried away by giants who were speaking a dialect like none I'd ever heard; in fact, I couldn't understand a word, although I couldn't help but think it was *some* form of Southern English.

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And we hadn't even seen a castle.

Damn you, Joel.

I blacked out, and woke up as I was being thrown this way and that in the seat of some kind of souped-up, armored suburban; but this beast hadn't rolled off any of Henry Ford's production lines. It was a chimerical combination of tank and automobile. Instead of windows, the passenger cab had thick glass portholes, and Lewis machine guns were mounted on the hood and trunk. I could hardly hear the motor as we sped and jostled into the long purple shadows of the mountains above, and my captors were as quiet as the mountains.

When I woke again, after dreaming that Joel was fine and we were back in the Moth gliding silently through the night over castles and fairy lights, I found myself in the air indeed. The suburban was being hoisted up the sheer face of a cliff, rising into the milky moonlight; and, startled, I bolted forward. The two black giants beside me pulled me back into the cushioned softness of the seat and held me there. I tried to talk to them, to ask them what was going on, but they just shook their heads as though they couldn't understand me.

Then with a bounce the suburban was lowered onto solid ground. Two men and a boy were waiting beside a crane used on aircraft carriers to hoist boats and planes; and as they removed the cables that had been attached to the hub-guards of the huge truck-tired wheels, they spoke to each other in that peculiar dialect that was both familiar...and unfamiliar.

Once again we drove, only now we were that much closer to the sky. As I looked out through the porthole on my right, the moon looked green, radiating its wan, sickly light through filigrees of cloud; and the road made of tapestry brick was as straight and neat and ghostly as the fog and mist that clung to it.

We passed a lake that could have been a dark mirror misted with breath and reflecting the stars and bloated moon. I caught a sudden scent of pine, and then I saw it, a château — no, rather a moon-painted castle — with opalescent terraces, walkways, mosque-like towers, and outbuildings rising from broad, tree-lined lawns.

But my destination, alas, would be otherwise.

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Two

"Hell's bells, it's almost noon."

"Clarence, how would you know whether it was noon or what? Your wristwatch has stopped so many times, it could be midnight."

"Don't call me Clarence or I'll break your legs."

"You an' whose army?"

I snapped awake and looked around the room, which resolved around me. Walls, floor, ceiling seemed to be made of a piece, a smooth, translucent layer of opal, which glowed with light; but I could not discern the source of the suffusing light, nor could I see the inset marks of tile, only high, straight, iridescent planes that reached to a ceiling of the same substance. I was lying in a comfortable feather bed with a jewel-inlaid footboard; the bed and an ebony table and elbow chair were the only pieces of furniture in this smooth, glittering travesty of a monk's cell.

"Well, sleeping beauty has awoke," said Clarence. He had a pale, freckled complexion, red hair that was graying, and a pop-eyed look, no doubt because his eyebrows were so white that they seemed to disappear. "You're probably still feelin' dopey," he said to me. "The slaves drugged you so Old Jefferson could do his interrogation. Takes a while for it to wear off."

"Well, they didn't drug *me*," said the man who had been goading Clarence about his name. He was bald, tall, and aggressive; and he had a ruddy complexion like Clarence — it was as if both men were of the same Irish and Dutch ancestry. Both wore pants and shirts that looked like pajamas, except Clarence wore an aviator's jacket and the bald man wore a cap.

Eleven other men were standing in the room behind them, and a short wiry aviator — I was sure right then and there that they were *all* aviators — said, "Old man Jefferson drugged *everybody*. Even you, Monty. You just don't remember none of it, while we do."

"But none of us remembers much," said Clarence, who introduced himself as Skip, and then introduced me to Monty Kleeck and Farley James and Rick Moss and Carl Crocker and Eddie Barthelmet, Harry Talmadge, Keith Boardman, Gregory "Cissy" Schneck, "Snap" Samuel Geraldson, and Stephen Freeburg, who "was the only Jew in this mess of Protestants."

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"You a Jew too?" asked the skinny, nervous upchuck who was called Cissy. There was a meanness in his voice, but he wasn't big enough to back it up, and I knew he was more dangerous than the three-hundred-pound hulk they called Snap.

I thought about saying yes, but I figured I might be here a while — maybe for life, from the look of them — and so I said, "No, I'm Catholic. You have a problem with that?"

"No, no," said Cissy, backing off. "I got no problem with Christians." Then in an undertone he said, "Long as they're Christians...."

"Where the hell am I?" I asked, some of the muzziness from the drugs finally clearing — if, indeed, I'd been drugged. I directed myself to Stephen Freeburg, who had the same kind of dark, sharp features as Rudolph Valentino, who last I heard had gone to prison for bigamy.

"You're in the Randolph Estes Jefferson Hotel," Freeburg said, smiling. "It's probably the fanciest, most comfortable jail in the world. And unless you can think of something we haven't, you're here for life."

"No, we'll get out," said Carl Crocker, a short, overweight, squarish chap with bristly brown hair — they must feed these guys pretty well, I thought; but everything was just words and thoughts wriggling like worms in sand. Nothing seemed real. My mouth felt like it was stuffed with wire. My eyes were burning. My head was pounding. Wake up, I told myself. Wake the hell up.

"Yeah, your tunnel," Freeburg said sarcastically. "Next, you and Snap will be drilling straight down." Everyone laughed at that.

I guess I looked bemused because Eddie Barthelmet, a reedy yet muscular man with thinning black hair, whom I figured immediately as the sort who kept his own counsel, said, "It's solid diamond underneath us. Hardest substance in the world."

I shook my head and grinned. I could take being the butt of the joke.

"I'm not joshing you. The whole goddamn mountain is diamond, except for the rock and stone above. And it's all owned by the Old Man, who isn't too willing to share, which is why we're down here, and he's up there." Everyone laughed at that, and Eddie just nodded toward the ceiling, as if some omniscient being were standing right above us. Then after a pause, he asked, "Did you happen to notice if your compass seemed to go wild when you approached the mountain?"

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"Yeah," I said. "But I figured it had been knocked out of whack."

"No, the same thing happened to me. None of the others remember anything being wrong with their compasses, so I figure that the Old Man concocted something new. An artificial magnetic field, or something like that."

"Well, if he could change the official maps of the United States, he could screw up our compasses, I suppose," Clarence said. I didn't figure him to be the brightest of the bunch, but I couldn't help but like him. He seemed genuinely concerned, and maybe it was the way he slouched or patted the chair, I don't know, but for some reason I had the feeling that he was really at home here. He turned to me and said, "Don't worry, you'll be meeting the Old Man soon enough. And when you're ready, I'll give you the tour of the place and help you get set up. Now you think you're ready to tell us your name and how you came to be flyin' out here? You *were* flyin'...?"

I nodded and told them my name — Paul Orsatti — and I told them that I was a mail pilot, which I'd been for a while, until I got myself fired from New York Chicago Air Transport for being self-righteous; and I wasn't going to tell them that I'd been kicking around for the past year as a roustabout stunt flier, working for crummy outfits like Pitkin's Circle-Q Flying Circus. Or that I'd been playing piano in cheapjack speakeasies for nothing more than drinks and whatever change the Doras and ossified lounge lizards could spare. I didn't tell them about Joel, and how he'd heard rumors about there being something strange in the mountain near Hades. I only told them I'd gotten a bit off-course — next thing I knew I was being shot at.

And as if I'd been caught telling a lie by the Lord God Almighty Himself, I heard a voice calling everyone to attention.

A broadcast from above.

"Well, boys," said God. "Don't you want to have a chat? My daughter's accompanying me, so y'all better be on your best behavior, gentlemen. None of your usual filthy street patois. Now shake a leg!"

Everyone started swearing and complaining, but they obediently moved out of my room toward where the voice was probably coming from, and Skip pulled me along, telling me that I might as well know my keeper

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and get it in my head that I'm here and that's that and how it's not so bad, in fact, probably better than we'd ever have it back home in the *real* world.

We walked through a seamless corridor made of the same stuff as the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room where I'd awakened. Dim, pervasive light radiated wanly from the ceiling, and doorways were evenly spaced on both sides. I caught glimpses into other rooms, some larger than others, some dark, some brightly lit, and could see rooms that led into other corridors. I was in a polished, many-hued glass warren that could hold many more men than we who were here now. We crowded into an empty room, which was a high tower...a terminus of sorts.

I looked up at a large, brightly lit opening covered with grating and saw a man looking down at us — I assumed he was Mr. Randolph Estes Jefferson.

Some sort of lens must have also covered the opening because Mr. Jefferson seemed greatly magnified and also slightly distorted, as though his girth was being pulled toward the edges of the opening. He looked to be about forty-five and had one of those faces that always remind me of a pug dog: jowly and fleshy, yet absolutely intent — the proverbial dog with a bone. He stood erect, as though he was wearing military gear instead of a straw boater, blue blazer, and white flannel Oxford bags. If it weren't for that face and his bearing, he could have been a fashion plate. He was swinging what I thought was a cane, swinging it back and forth over the opening to the tower of our prison (but which was, in effect, just a grating in the grass from his perspective). A girl of perhaps eighteen stood beside her pug dog father. She wore a thin blue blouse with a pleated tennis skirt and a blue bandeau to keep her hair in place. Her hair was blond, curly, and bobbed, and although I couldn't see the color of her eyes, I imagined they would be blue. Her mouth was crimson, her face tan against the blue bandeau. Even with the slight distortion, I could see that she was perfection — a pure vision of youth and freshness and beauty.

"Hey, leave the old guy and come on down here."

"Push him through the grate, we'll take care of everything for you."

"They don't call me snugglepup for nottin'," Crocker shouted, and most everyone was laughing...except Mr. Jefferson. His daughter smiled warmly at all of us and bowed, as though she was being presented at a cotillion in New York or Chicago or Paris.

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"Gentlemen," said Mr. Jefferson, "remember your manners. If y'all continue to embarrass me before my daughter, I shall be happy to instruct my slaves to forget to supply you with your daily rations, which I presume are to your expectations?"

"Slaves?" I asked Skip, who was standing beside me and rubbernecking, to get a better look at the girl.

"Yeah," Skip said, "he's got hundreds of 'em, I guess."

"The rations are fine, except we could do without the fish eggs," said Rick Moss, a short unshaven man, who was so muscular that he looked like he might have been a weight lifter.

"So the rations of caviar are not appreciated," Jefferson said. "Well, we'll take that item off the menu." Randolph Estes Jefferson sounded cheerful, as if he were merely a waiter taking an order and listening to customers' complaints. "Now my Phoebe loves caviar," he said, putting his arm around his daughter, "so I, of course, just assumed y'all would too. I figured your generation with all your jazz and Wall Street savvy was more sophisticated than mine."

But Harry Talmadge and Keith Boardman, who were standing beside me and looking quietly bored, were not exactly what you'd call jazz babies — Harry looked to be in his middle forties, but it would be difficult to guess whether Keith was in his fifties or sixties. He looked well fed and well exercised, as though he were someone who could afford to pamper himself and maintain his youth.

I thought it odd that our jailer Mr. Jefferson used "y'all" like someone from the Deep South, yet he had no accent at all...which was probably the same thing as having a midwest accent.

"Well, *I* don't mind the caviar," said fat Snap Geraldson. "I guess that makes me the only sophisticated guy down here." That got a laugh.

"Are you here to bait us like bears, or have you come up with a solution to our problem?" asked Freeburg.

"Ah, Mr. Freeburg, you are always so angry and so ready to argue how many angels might rest on the head of a pin. Aren't you satisfied with the Talmud I provided for your studies?"

"I've simply taken the bait," Freeburg said.

"Well, good for you, then. But we've been over and over my predicament. I — being a man of conscience — must bear the burden of keeping

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y'all in prison because to free you would be harmful to my family and myself and my retainers. You'll soon come to understand that, too, Mr. Orsatti."

I almost took a step back when he addressed me.

"I trust you're getting settled in comfortably," he continued. "The other boys will show you the ropes. If anyone mistreats you, just slip a note into the food slot. It'll reach me in due course. I've developed quite a paternalistic affection for all of you. Quite."

"We'd promise not to peach on you," cried Carl Crocker. "And that's the honest truth. Just let us go. Give us a chance."

"Ah, but you couldn't help yourself, could you, Mr. Crocker," Jefferson said, as he pulled a lawn chair over for Phoebe and then disappeared for a few seconds to return with a chair for himself. "You'd have to tell *some*one. And if you could come back and get past my slaves and my guns, why then *you'd* be the richest man on Earth. Would you like me to send some more gems down to you? You can have whatever you wish — diamonds, rubies, sapphires, a birthstone of your own weight."

"Won't do me any good down here," Carl said.

"Ah, you see, value is relative. But once you got away from here, these diamonds and rubies and sapphires would be worth as much as life itself. Surely you can see that?"

"No, I can't," said Carl.

"As I've asked you before, do you want me to have your wives and girlfriends brought here? I'll extend your accommodations. Y'all would have everything you could wish for."

"Except freedom," said Eddie Barthelmet. "What would it take to buy that?"

"You can't *buy* anything from me," said Mr. Jefferson. "All that I give is as a gift. When last we spoke — how long ago was that? Perhaps a few months ago? — I asked if you could come up with a better solution. Well, this is your chance. Propose."

"So you can dispose," said Eddie.

"Very good, very good indeed. The newer members seem to be quicker than the rest of you. You'll need to study to keep up."

"Then let us have some newspapers," shouted Crocker.

"Yeah, is prohibition repealed yet?"

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"What would you care?" Mr. Jefferson said. "Whatever spirits you request are sent to you. What more could you ask for?"

That elicited shouting and swearing, and Mr. Jefferson just smiled and held up his hands. "Well, gentlemen, I see that we're finished."

"We do care about whether prohibition has been repealed," Eddie shouted up to Mr. Jefferson. "Just as we care about what the stock market is doing, what's the new dance, what's happening with the Fascists in Italy, what's the latest Zane Grey, is Dempsey still heavyweight champion, who won the World Series?"

"Giants over the Yankees, 5-3 in the fifth," I said in a low voice. Eddie nodded to me, and a few of the other boys started to argue the merits of the Giants and the Yankees.

"There's your answer," Mr. Jefferson said. He could only have heard me if he had listening devices planted in here, which, of course, he would.

"We need access to newspapers...and the radio," Eddie said.

"It will only stir you up, son, and make you yearn for what you can't have," Jefferson said. "You've got a library of the great classics of literature. That should be edification enough."

"I want *The Saturday Evening Post*," Crocker said.

"I want *The Strand*."

"I want Phoebe."

"Good-bye, gentlemen," Jefferson said.

"Wait," shouted Eddie. "Why not at least give us leave? At least, let one or two of us out for a few days. You could have your slaves guard us to make sure we couldn't run for it. We could at least see a ball game, or a movie. Then you could bring us back, and take another group out. As you are always fond of telling us, 'Money's no object.'"

Jefferson made a clucking noise and said, "That's a new twist, Mr. Barthelmet. Very good, indeed. Except my slaves would have to gag you and bind you so you wouldn't shout for help or make a run for it, and the constabulary might look askance at that. But even if you were a model parolee, you'd come back and yearn for what you'd seen. No, it would just deepen the pain of your circumstances. Allow me to bring your wives or lovers or friends to you."

"No," shouted Rick Moss, and he was echoed by the others.

"It's bad enough you've buried us."

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"Let us the hell out of here, you bastid."

"Well, gentlemen, I think that's more than enough," Jefferson said. "Come on, Phoebe, enough diversion for you." He stood up, and I could see then that he had been holding a golf club, not a cane. We were buried under his golf course, and he and his daughter were just out playing eighteen holes. The sonovabitch!

There was a grating noise, and the opening above went black.

"Wait," I shouted reflexively.

The ceiling irised open, and Jefferson and his beautiful Phoebe looked down at us. "Yes, Mr. Orsatti?" he asked.

"I'd like a piano."

Jefferson laughed and said, "Done."

"That's all we need, more noise — "

"We could use some of that — "

"You boys can dance with each other — "

"It beats what we're doin' now — "

But before the ceiling closed, I could see Phoebe looking down — right at *me* — and smiling.

Three

The piano arrived, as promised. It was a special-edition, pearl-white Steinway grand, which produced a huge, full orchestral sound, yet the keys had such an incredibly fast action that I couldn't help but open up with a boogie-woogie medley. My feet stomped on the floor as my left hand flew over the keys beating out syncopated rhythms that were so tricky that I dared not watch what I was doing, lest I falter; and my right hand, weaving various melodies through the rhythms of my left, might as well have had a mind of its own.

I was a one-man band.

I was also, needless to say, half in the proverbial bag. But so was everyone else, except Cissy Schneck and Farley James, a nice British fellow who had been an Oxford don before the war. I found out from Skip that he had been an ace pilot. He'd come over here to compete in the ocean-to-ocean air race in '19, the same year the Cincinnati Reds beat the Sox in the eighth game, which was a miracle. So was Farley James, I guess,

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because he'd come in second place and decided to stay and start an air flying company with Charlie Lindbergh. That surprised the hell out of me because Joel, may God rest his soul, said he'd worked for Lindbergh for a while.

"Hey, Farley," I called, and he dutifully came over to the piano, where Skip formally introduced us.

"Fahley, z'ish is Pauhhzzotti...."

"Skip tells me you had some business with Charlie Lindbergh."

Farley nodded, smiling at Skip who then began to lead everyone in another chorus of another new song I had played for them.

"*Do you have any bananas?*"

"*Yes! We have no bananas!*"

"Do you know Charlie?" Farley asked.

"Yeah, I met him through a friend of mine, Joel Wagner. Ring any bells?"

"Small world. Sure, I remember Joel. Good aviator. Dependable. What's he doing with himself these days?"

"He's dead."

Farley looked shocked, and he stared down at his shoes, which were so highly polished he could probably see his face in them.

"Did you ever talk to him about...a castle up in the mountains?" I asked.

His thin, sensitive face was tight as shellacked paper. He looked straight at me and said, "No." After a pause, he said, "But he was shot down with you, wasn't he..."

I started playing "Look for the Silver Lining," which everyone knew, then "Wild Rose," and "Ma — He's Making Eyes at Me" which Snap Geraldson sang in falsetto. That was something to hear...and see. Isn't often an elephant imitates a parrot being squeezed into a juicer. I played and sang Bessie Smith's "Downhearted Blues," and, of course, nobody knew who she was; but Rick Moss and Snap started dancing with each other. I taught them how to Charleston, which had just become all the rage, and all hell broke loose with everybody swaying back and forth, slapping their knees, swiveling around on the balls of their feet, and falling over like they'd been dancing in a marathon for two weeks. After a while I started playing slower tunes again like "All by Myself" and "Who's Sorry

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Now," and then even a little Lizst and Bach, and the party broke up, and —

"You can't sleep on the piana."

I don't know how he did it, but somehow Skip got me up and dragged me or walked me or rolled me toward my room. I remember seeing open doors that led into rooms with pool tables and ping-pong tables. I remember a kitchen and gymnasium and a room that was so bright I could barely look into it. I passed the fabled library that God had provided with all the classics but no up-to-date *Saturday Evening Posts*, and I remember feeling a pressure around my temples; I imagined that Joel and I were back in the Moth, and the engine was on fire, and my forehead was hot, and then something squeezed my stomach, and from far away Joel or Skip or somebody said, "Hot damn," and I dreamed about beautiful Phoebe looking down at me from the perfect golf-course gardens and tennis courts of Heaven. Her eyes, set in her sun-bronzed face like perfectly shaped transparent gems, were impossibly blue. Sky blue freedom.

And then I woke up in Skip's room.

"Drink this. Hair of the dog."

Skip probably looked worse than I did. I couldn't see him very well — my head was pulsing with pain. I guess I wasn't used to drinking real hooch. The rotgut I'd been drinking since '20 hadn't killed me, but it sure felt like the vintage Johnny Walker and Chivas Regal would.

I drank the tomato juice and brew, which Skip called "Virginia Dare." It went down like razor blades, and when I stopped being sick, I asked him why he'd decorated most every surface in the room with a towel — there was a white bath towel neatly tacked over his desk, a white dish towel on the bed table, a red face towel placed like a doily over the back of his stuffed chair, another added color and warmth to a utilitarian tallboy, and towels of various sizes and hues decorated the inside of every drawer open to my view.

"I learned how to do that when I was a kid. I spent a few years in an orphanage." He grinned. "Well, not exactly an orphanage. A private school. But same difference. After Dad popped it, and Mom decided she'd follow by sticking her head in a stove, Dad's best friend kept me in the best schools for as long as my inheritance money held out, which wasn't long."

That was more than I wanted to know about Skip's schooldays, but he seemed cheerful about it all, even about finding his mother, who he said

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was "blue as a curtain." He said he'd learned about making things cozy in "the orphanage," and he'd got used to decorating with towels.

"Thanks for the bed," I said, "but you didn't have to sleep on the floor. You could've slept in my room, if you couldn't drag me that far."

"I could barely get you *this* far," Skip said. "You're heavier than you look. But I never sleep anywhere but right here. It's as much home as anything else. Some of the other guys move around. You know — "

I didn't, and I could feel the nausea working its way up to my throat.

" — sleep with each other, like that. No girls here, what else you going to do? Except get really friendly with Madam Palm and her five daughters." He grinned again, looking pop-eyed and childlike, and wagged his right hand at me. "I prefer Madam Palm."

"Can't God up there help you out with some women?"

Skip laughed and said, "Old Jefferson's very prim and proper. You heard him. The choice is wives or girlfriends, or nothin' — and he'd make you marry your girlfriend, sure as shit, not that it would matter, anyway, 'cause once they got here, they wouldn't have any choice. They'd be stuck here forever amen like we are. And who knows how dangerous it would be for them, what with all the other guys. We asked Jefferson if we could borrow some of his slave girls, although we never saw them, but he doesn't believe in whorin' and promiscuity, as he calls it, and, anyway, according to him, he wouldn't misuse his slaves."

"How does he keep slaves? It's 1923, for Chrissakes, not 1823."

Skip shrugged. "There's all kind of stories. George Bernard, who's been here the longest — over twenty years — probably knows, but he ain't saying. You didn't meet George. He's sort of a hermit, doesn't even go to the tower when the old man calls. He don't talk to no one. He wasn't no flier, that's for sure, but, like I said, he don't talk. You got to respect that, I figure. Anyway, none of us talk about the slaves since Lowell Legendre was poisoned — now he *was* a pilot, shot down just like the rest of us, only he could speak a couple of languages. He had your room, come to think of it. Anyway, he said he was learning how to talk slave-talk from one of the slaves who brung the food. That must have been some trick, 'cause I've never met any of the old man's slaves who could speak or understand one word of English. Lowell said he was getting the hang of it, though, and that once he'd figured it all out, he'd know what was going on and maybe we

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could figure a way out of here. But he got sick after eating dinner — it was terrible, worse than my mother — and we tried calling for someone to get us some help. But the old man and his slaves suddenly got deaf, dumb, and blind. We didn't get any food after that for a week. All we had was water. And after that, all the slaves that had anything to do with us were new. So probably best not to get too curious about them. You'll see your share."

"I want to meet this George Bernard," I said.

"I'll show you his room," Skip said, "but he won't let you in. I once — "

I made a dash for Skip's toilet, but didn't make it.

When I came around again, still hung-over with a blinding headache and a mouth that tasted like it was full of metal shavings and dirt, I was back in my room.

Old Skip must have found new reserves of strength. Or a few buddies.

GEORGE BERNARD *did* receive me, as if he wasn't a prisoner like the rest of us, but a guest with special privileges. However, I waited before knocking on his door, which was a football field away from the rest of us. I got to know my fellow inmates. I spent time in the "sun room" with Snap Geraldson discussing Edward Egan and Sam Mosberg, who took gold in the Lightweight and Light Heavyweight categories respectively at the Antwerp Olympics in '20. It was like discussing boxing with the Buddha. I played ping-pong with Carl Crocker and pool with Keith Boardman and Harry Talmadge, who wanted to be brought up to date on current events; and we argued over the Sacco and Vanzetti convictions. I swam every day in the pool, usually with Skip, who did a couple of miles a day, when he wasn't coming off a hangover, and I spent hours talking plays and movies and books with Farley James and Stephen Freeburg in the library. We discussed Conrad and Gide and Ibanez and Waley and Apollinaire, while we drank God's good whiskey until we were ossified. And every day I practiced the piano. I played for hours, doing scales, working the life back into my fingers, which flew over the keyboard; and if I had to be here, if I was going to be trapped in this diamond pit with this ragtag group of swillers in this speakeasy prison, I'd get my hands back. I practiced the sonatas of Scarlatti and Clementi and Mozart and Bach and Schumann and

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Brahms, and Liszt, of course; and it all came back to me; it was like I'd never left conservatory. I played Debussy's *Études for Piano*, Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*, Schoenberg's *Five Piano Pieces*, which I knew by heart, and Stravinsky's *Piano-Rag Music*. I played until I was exhausted, and there were no days or nights, just melody, counterpoint, rhythm, and drinking and talking.

Was I in prison? Or purgatory?

Or Heaven, as it surely was for Skip — good food, whiskey, friends, a room tidied up with towels. But after Snap Geraldson threw a fit and hurt his back, I began to suspect that *everyone* was crazy....

That's when I decided to visit George Bernard.

"Welcome, Mr. Orsatti."

A beefy man dressed in an old-fashioned military-style smoking jacket with silk cord frogging stood hulking like a costumed bouncer in the partially closed doorway. He was the same body type as Mr. Randolph Estes Jefferson — a bull-dog endomorph — and he was wearing flannel trousers that were so wrinkled they looked like he had been sleeping in them for weeks, which he might have been. His slippers were torn, and his sparse, curly brown hair appeared as though an electric current had passed through it only seconds before my arrival. But while the Lord God Jefferson above struck me as conceited, self-satisfied, and vital (as male members of the upper crust were trained to be), George Bernard seemed somehow incongruously tall and fat and fox-like. He sized me up, seemingly taking in every detail, and grinned.

"How do you know my name?" I asked, trying to place the ratchety noises that were emanating from all over his room. But I couldn't see past him.

Obligingly, he stepped aside.

"Skip Cinesky told me that — "

I suppose I was stopped dead in my tracks — so to speak! — because George's room was mostly a huge table covered with Lionel standard gauge HO track that ran over perfectly modeled hills and rills and suspension bridges, and through pastureland and woods and tunnels and realistic towns with main streets fronted by electrically lit municipal buildings, stores, and porched houses. It was like looking down from a cockpit, except there were too many trains chugging and spewing wisps

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of smoke as they rushed through miniature fields to miniature destinations. At least twenty brass-trimmed Lionel and American Flyer locomotives pulled blue, green, and yellow enamel cattle cars, boxcars, oil tank cars, coal cars, day coaches, Pullmans, baggage cars, and bright red cabooses.

"You wanna try it?" George asked, as he pointed out a large black box that controlled the switching and speed; and I thought I said, "No," but there I was working the controls of the Blue Comet while George went into the kitchen to fix up drinks. Unlike the rest of his neighbors, he had a suite down here in the pit. I couldn't judge how many rooms he might have had.

For a few seconds, George's Blue Comet train set occupied all my attention because he had pushed all the rubber-tipped control levers over to #9 and the locomotives accelerated. They were chugging along so fast that they'd fly off the tracks when they hit the curves or smash into each other at the track switches. I pulled all the levers back, but not before a Cowen Comet Special locomotive pulling freight cars with their own magnetic lifting cranes jumped the track. Cars scattered across the table; although I prevented a few cars from falling, I couldn't reach the expensive, heavy black locomotive, which broke when it hit the floor.

"Good save," George said, returning with two whiskey glasses and a bottle.

"If that's your idea of a good save, you must have a lot of broken train sets."

George gestured toward two easy chairs placed around a table in the corner of the room. "What's the good of having things if you can't break them?"

There wasn't much I could say to that. We sat down, and he poured far too much whiskey into cut-glass tumblers.

"That's why I'm down here. I broke too many things. So why give up a bad habit?"

"What did you break?" I asked.

"Ah.... Confidences. The golden rule of silence. But only when I got drunk."

I tasted the whiskey, which was woody and bitter and good, and hefted the weight of the tumbler.

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"You can *try* breaking that," George said, "but I'd drink up the contents first. You think it's crystal, don't you? Wrong, my boy. It's diamond...and probably enough to buy you the Ritz-Carlton in New York City, I would judge. But the boys have already told you that this mountain is one big diamond, didn't they? But that's probably about all they could tell you."

"What can *you* tell me?"

"Oh, probably everything."

"Can you tell me how to get out of here?" I asked.

"That's easy," he said, smiling and obviously enjoying himself hugely. "But you'll find out everything soon enough."

"How?"

He pointed upward, then poured himself another drink and topped mine up.

"For crying out loud, what are you getting at?"

"But don't break anything, 'cause he won't take you back."

"Who won't take me back where?"

"God won't take you back here."

Completely nuts, I thought.

After one more go-round with the trains, I left.

He probably was nuts.

But as I soon discovered, he was also probably right.

Four

It seemed like a dream, but, of course, it wasn't. I hadn't drunk very much, only a highball with Farley James and Keith Boardman in the library where we'd played a few games of mah-jongg after dinner. That might not sound like a very manly thing to do, but then none of that mattered in the pit. I'd become a veteran.

We shouted "Pung!" and "Chow!" and "Kong!" and swore blue murder as we rolled the dice and tried to build winning hands out of the inlaid ivory tiles. After about an hour, I started feeling queasy and headachy and cotton-mouthed, and so did Farley and Keith. We figured it was the food and blamed Snap Geraldson, who must have requested

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shit-on-a-shingle again — AKA tuna on toast — and the dumbwaiter in the dining room obliged.

So we dispersed and went to our rooms.

I fell asleep immediately, fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion, as though I was back in the war, flying mission after mission; and I dreamed that I was looking up at my ceiling, which glowed dimly like faraway neon; and it was like being a kid again and seeing faces and animals and buildings in the stucco ceiling of my bedroom. Only now part of the ceiling was slowly floating down toward me, and two slaves dressed in white uniforms were standing on what might have been a scaffold platform. They were black angels, and they carried me up to heaven. I smelled sweat and ambergris and roses and

I dreamed that I would float upward forever....

As I woke up, blinking in the strong morning light, I could see ebony panels on tracks sliding open. Revealing formal gardens with stone hermae, geysering fountains, lamps, a marble wellhead, terra-cotta jars tall as a man, and statues of sylphs and mythical animals so lifelike that they almost seemed to move through the boughs and terraced pathways. My new chamber was now open to the world, and I could smell perfume and the richness of loamy soil. Beyond the gardens lay a small village of cottages massed around a church; but it was no ordinary church; it rose into the brittle blue sky like it was all of a steeple; and it was transparent as glass, proof that man could rise up and tear into the very fabric of Heaven.

"The gardens are indeed beautiful this morning, are they not, sir," said a man dressed in the same uniform as the men in my dream. He looked to be in his seventies, but he carried himself like an officer who was used to giving orders. His strong face and bald pate seemed polished; the wrinkles that radiated from his eyes and the corners of his thin mouth resembled fine scrolling chiseled into mahogany.

"Yeath," I said, my mouth dry and swollen and tasting of iron. My tongue didn't seem to be working right; it filled my entire mouth and wouldn't get out of the way of my teeth.

I'd surely been drugged.

"Whey am I an' ha'ad I get hea?"

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The old man smiled, as one would at a child, and said, "You're in the north bedroom of the guest suite. You're a guest of the master, and it's my privilege to serve you, Mr. Orsatti." I couldn't place his accent. It seemed Southern, but it had a certain crispness, a *wrongness*, as if an Englishman or German were speaking with a drawl.

I heard a rustling behind my bed, and although my head felt like it was half-filled with some vile-tasting, vile-smelling liquid, I managed to turn...and see a giant dressed in white like the old man.

"Don't give no never mind to Isaac, Mr. Orsatti. You can think of him as your shadow...or your own personal bodyguard, if you prefer. Isaac won't be a bother, as he understands no English.... Now, *you've* got a big day today, sir. A bath to start the morning right, sir?"

My head began to clear and I found my voice. "Tell me what the hell I'm doing here?"

"It's up to the master alone to explain his intentions, sir. But I believe you're to give a recital in an hour."

"The master?"

"Master Jefferson, sir. Surely you know — "

"And you, what do *you* know?" I asked Isaac, who stood as still as one of the statues in the garden and gazed at me disinterestedly.

"I told you, sir, he cannot understand you."

"Can't slaves understand English?"

"Sir, I am not in a position to advise...or to educate you. But I'm sure Master Jefferson will see to all your questions in his time."

"Are *you* a slave?" I asked. I would recite the Gettysburg Address to him if I had to.

"I have served Master Jefferson for many years, sir. Now would you prefer rosewater and a salt-water finish or a milk bath followed by warm water? Isaac will remove your pajamas."

I wasn't letting Isaac or anyone else near me.

I heard the old man sigh and nod his head, and then the bed tilted, and before I could gather my wits to grab hold of something, I was sliding toward the wall, pajamas and all. Drapes parted, as I slid down an incline into warm water. I heard myself shouting, but brought myself under control immediately. The chute folded back into the wall. I was in a sunken bath, the water warm as a womb; but swimming all around me —

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and above and below — were salt-water fish of every description: spiny fire fish, huge groupers, barramundi, mackerel, cod, orange-striped dragon fish, and there were jellyfish with long, almost transparent tentacles, a diamond-toothed moray eel, sea snakes, turtles, black spotted cuttlefish, and a hammerhead shark that was at least seven feet long.

The shark swam toward me, swam through the illuminated water.

Only a layer of crystal separated the shark from my feet, for my bathroom was inside an aquarium, and the great mass of water pressing against the walls cast shimmering, coruscating reflections everywhere. Then rain began to fall from the ceiling, and jets of rosewater and liquid soap bubbled into the bath while electric paddles churned the water into a blanket of sparkling soap bubbles. Music began playing, as if a chamber orchestra composed of mermaids were playing beside me.

The old man and Isaac stood on either side of the white marble sunken bath.

"My name is Robert," the old man said. "When you have completed your bath, Isaac will give you a rubdown and a shave and dress you. I will serve you breakfast in the sitting room," and with that he bowed and left.

Perhaps it was a combination of the drugs and warm bath, but — against my will — I found myself enjoying this warm, voluptuous kaleidoscope of a bath.

Nevertheless, I had the cold, dead feeling that I was being prepared for my last meal.

WASHED, BATHED, massaged, dressed, and fed steak filet and eggs and hills of fried potatoes on plates shaped out of layers of emerald and diamond and ruby, I was led — like a royal prisoner — through corridors and rooms with walls created entirely of diamonds and other precious gems, through rooms where fire seemed to coruscate over walls and ceilings, through rooms composed of deep green crystal that could have held back the weight of an ocean with its dark, deep creatures, through elegant rooms, antique rooms, and rooms that might have been designed by Klee and Kandinsky to defy the normal rules of up and down. I walked over carpets of the rarest furs, glimpsed walls covered with paintings by Rubens, Caravaggio, da Vinci, Titian, Giotto, Manet, Monet, Poussin,

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Cézanne, and Miró, Picasso, Ernst, Gris, Demuth, and Modigliani. Marble creatures reached out to me: naiads, sylphs, satyrs, soldiers, gods, and goddesses by Michelangelo, Saint-Gaudens, Rodin, and Brancusi; and I was led up stairs cut into a huge, marble-veined extended hand.

Into a Baroque hall of mirrors that overlooked park-like grounds.

Hundreds of mirrors were set opposite windows and into the scrolled columns and archways. The high ceiling was curved, and painted angels gazed down from clouds in heaven upon gold and silver chairs and bejeweled trees. A forest of gold. Glades of diamonds. In keeping with this stone and jeweled forest was a grand piano that looked to be cut from a gigantic block of jade. Our feet clacked on the inlaid floor of this formal hall that seemed to extend into a finger-width arched door in the distance as Robert and Isaac led me to the piano.

Robert bowed and said, "I will leave you now, sir."

Isaac stood over me, and I was sure that, should I stand up from the piano, he would force me back down onto the cushioned stool.

"And what am I to play?" I asked.

"I would think that would be up to you sir," Robert said, and, nodding to Isaac, he clattered away toward the far, perspective-shrunk doorway, his reflections creating an army of stiff, marching Roberts.

"And who am I to play to...?"

I sat before the translucent green piano, and began warming up by playing scales from Clementi's instruction book. Looking around the seemingly endless room, I couldn't see anyone except for Isaac, reflected in a dozen mirrors; he stood so still that I wondered if he even breathed. But I could *feel* other eyes watching me, and I remembered what crazy George Bernard had said about God not allowing me to return to my gilded prison. What was he planning for me, then? I wondered. Certainly Master Randolph Estes Jefferson wasn't going to take any chances with me, although I wondered...perhaps I *could* escape. I chuckled and looked around at this room constructed from dream and imagination. Would I *want* to escape?

But I could feel Isaac's presence pressing against me and knew I was freer in the pit. No matter, I was here to play, and if I failed Jefferson's test — if that was what it was — who knew what he might do. So I played, beginning with Chopin's *Waltz in G Flat*, then playing his préludes and

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nocturnes and études. I played Bach and Mozart and Beethoven. I expected *something* to happen. Someone besides Isaac to appear. Then I began playing Erik Satie's piano works, which I loved: *Gymnopédies*, *Gnossiennes*, *Peccadilles importunes*...Satie the joker, the dissonant, the genius; and I heard a giggle behind me.

Saw reflections.

Phoebe stood before me, big as life, just as she stood beside and behind me, reflections in a myriad mirrors, a company of lovely, fragile, faun-like Phoebes looking awkward one instant and graceful the next. She wore a white gown, a silk scarf draped carelessly — or perhaps very carefully — over her shoulder, and a fetching bonnet with a red sash. Her eyes were indeed blue, her face was freckled, and she was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen.

She said something to Isaac, which sounded like, "*Ra'ase, nah'ye haingwine heaightmuh,*" and then she stood right by the piano and said, "Well, Mr. Paul Orsatti, you can certainly play, and I told Poppa that if he didn't bring you up out of that horrible place with those men, I'd never speak to him again. You're a genius, that's just what I told him, and I told him you'd be happy to teach me how to play the piano. I want to play as well as you, can you do that for me?"

I was about to tell her that I didn't know, but she said something else to Isaac, who looked sullenly down at the glassy floor.

"What did you say to him?" I asked.

"Just now, or before?" She looked steadily at me, and I could feel myself blushing. I don't know why, but she made me feel like I was sixteen and pimply and gawky and trying to get up the courage to ask out the prom queen. She was just a wisp of a thing, her cheeks were freckled, and her curly blond hair stuck out from under her bonnet. Yet she seemed completely self-assured, as though she was accustomed to absolute obedience. And innocent. Perhaps it was the combination that unnerved me. Or perhaps I had just instantly fallen completely in love with her.

"I don't know," I said. "Both, I guess."

She giggled. "Well, I told him to calm himself down, that you probably weren't going to hurt me or kill me or anything like that." She backed away a step. "You're not, are you?"

"No, of course not."

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"There, you see...? And then I told him...."

"Yes?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," she said. "Now do you want to take me for a walk before you meet Poppa? He wants to have a talk with you."

"What about your friend Isaac?"

"Oh, don't worry about him. He'll keep out of the way," and she turned to him and glared. He quickly resumed looking at the floor.

"I'm Phoebe," she said as she led the way out of what she called the Mirror Gallery. Isaac followed, keeping a safe distance.

"I know your name."

"Ah, those awful men in the pit told you, did they." It wasn't a question. "I hate them."

"Why?"

"Because of what they say about me."

"And what is that?"

"That's for me to know."

I nodded. She was obviously younger than her years, but I couldn't help feeling attracted to her. I'd often been in the company of the rich and spoiled, and Phoebe was certainly the quintessential product of excess. Could she even imagine that there was another world out there, a world of people working twelve hours a day, haggling over pennies at the market, cooking their own food, sharing their possessions? Probably...no, definitely not.

"How did you know I could play the piano?" I asked.

"Well, because I heard you, that's how. Poppa can listen to everything those horrible men say down in the pit. And so can I, although if you tell Poppa that, I'll never speak to you again." We walked down a huge stone staircase and past the Neptune Pool that reflected the sun as a sheet of yellow light. "But you wouldn't care, would you?"

"About what?" I asked, overwhelmed by the sheer size of this place, by the formal gardens with statues as large as houses, by the pergola ahead, which was fashioned of crystal and gems and seemed to extend for a mile. And there was the château — the castle that connected to dozens of other buildings, each one of a different period, yet part of the perfect white, geometric whole — that was surrounded by pools the color of terra-cotta and marble constructions that resembled Greek and Roman ruins.

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"You wouldn't care if I ever spoke to you again, would you, Mr. Paul Orsatti?" She sniffled, turning her head from me. "Well?"

"Of course, I would care."

"Why?"

"I don't know!"

"There, you see?" she said, but of course I didn't see.

"I listened to you play, even the night you got so drunk that the dumbbell with no eyebrows had to drag you to his room. I listened to you snore. Do you know how loud you snore? I'd do something about that if I were you."

I chuckled and asked if her father was able to see his prisoners as well as hear them. But Phoebe ignored that question...as though she hadn't heard it.

We walked past tennis courts, a reservoir, greenhouses, barracks, a zoo surrounded by marble lions, and then through the pergola to the edge of the formal gardens. Phoebe glanced back at Isaac every few minutes, and he would respectfully drop back several feet.

"I think it's all a lie," Phoebe said.

"What?" I asked.

"That the servants can't understand English. I think they've been tricking Poppa about that for years, and so does Uncle George."

"Uncle George?"

"You met him and played with his trains. That's what Poppa told me."

"Your *uncle* is in the pit?"

"Oh, yes," Phoebe said. "George Bernard Jefferson. He didn't tell you his last name, I imagine." She giggled. "He's always been in there. Well, practically always. But Poppa will tell you all about that. He tells everybody."

Everybody...? I thought.

"Would you like to kiss me now?" Phoebe asked, as we looked out at a herd of Master Jefferson's zebras grazing on a hill beyond the gardens. I said something inane about Isaac lurking behind us — which he was...and the moment passed.

Of course I wanted to kiss her. But she looked so vulnerable...and she was so young.

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"Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Airplanes, I think. Listen — "

Sure enough, I could hear engines. But I couldn't see anything in that eggshell sky, which was the exact color of Phoebe's eyes.

Five

An alarm sounded and a chill caught the air as we made our way back to the castle, which Phoebe called *Adamas*. She told me with breathless conviction that the king of France hadn't lived in anything half as nice, and she ought to know, she said, because Poppa had all the plans of the greatest castles in the world, and he made sure that his was the best. She was excited about reaching the roof garden so we could watch the airplanes through the telescope there.

Although she hurried to the castle, she was not in the least afraid. Isaac tried to say something to her, but she had only to shout something quick and guttural at him and he fell back behind us, properly cowed.

Then a porcine, well-dressed young man flanked by what I took for two slaves caught up with us by the Roman ruins beside the pool. He was nervous and out of breath, and kept looking at the sky as if lightning were going to strike him down at any second. Just ahead was a marble staircase that led to the western exposures of one of the buildings that adjoined the château. I could see a glint of metal: the telescope mounted on the embrasure.

"Father sent me to find you," he said, out of breath. "You won't believe how angry he is. You're supposed to be in the bunkers, and not legging around with *him*." He meant me, and his eyebrows knitted together and his face got all scrunched up when he said "him." I couldn't help but smile.

"You won't even get to keep him until September, if you act like that," the young man continued. "And that's *exactly* what Father said. I didn't make it up."

The alarm sounded again.

"Now come on, for crying out loud, or do you want to get killed out here?"

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"Those airplanes are probably just mail carriers, like always," Phoebe said. "And mail carriers don't carry bombs. But they're all gone now."

She cocked her head, obviously listening for the sound of airplane engines. Everything was quiet, but for the wind.

"You see, false alarm. All that trouble for nothing...and I *was* coming back."

"Well, you can tell that to Father," the young man said.

"You're not my boss, Mr. Near Beer."

The young man blushed at that, and Phoebe said, "Mr. Orsatti, this is my brother, Morgan."

Morgan gave me a slight nod, then shouted something at Isaac; but I couldn't understand a word.

"Isaac had nothing to do with it," Phoebe said. "It was my idea. And if you dare say one word — "

I heard the sudden drone of an engine, and then the deafening, bone-shaking *stucka-stucka* of anti-aircraft guns, which were mounted on the castle fortifications above.

There was another burst...and another.

"You see?" Morgan screamed at Phoebe, and he grabbed her. But she broke free. Isaac stepped over to her, as if to intervene. The guns fired again. I heard a distant explosion, but couldn't see any airplanes — the castle blocked the view. One of Jefferson's slaves shouted something to Isaac, who looked nervously at Phoebe and then at me, before running after Morgan and his fellows.

"Morgan is such a flat tire," Phoebe said. "And I'll bet you ten thousand dollars right now that those enemy airplanes don't have any guns." She paused, then explained, "According to Poppa, everybody is the enemy. And so Morgan is always so-oh afraid we're going to get bombed. I know that Poppa scares the bunk out of him about it to make a man out of him, but Morgan is just a flat tire."

I followed her up the marble staircase, across a patio, and up several more staircases to the roof garden. I could see Jefferson's slaves manning the anti-aircraft guns, which were quiet now. Ghostly pink billowing clouds were filling up the sky like suds in a bathtub. From the position of the sun, I could see it was late afternoon. But how could that be? I must have slept through the morning.

I stared at an oily trail of black smoke left by a plane that had been shot

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out of the sky. But I could also hear the distant thrumming of an engine. Perhaps it was one of Jefferson's. Or perhaps one of the intruders had escaped into the swollen pink and purple curtain of storm clouds. Phoebe tossed her bonnet onto a wrought iron chair and looked through the brass telescope, swinging it around so hard, it was a wonder she could see *anything*.

"There it is," she said. "Right over...there.... Poppa's guns got it. See the smoke in the canyon? Something's burning. Positively. But I can't make out very much. I can't see for jellybeans without my glasses. Here, you try." She pulled away from the telescope, brushing my face with her curly hair, and I could smell her perfume, lilac sweet and damp. I looked through the eyepiece. There was indeed a plane burning. I couldn't see it well through the smoke, but it looked like a Curtiss Jenny. I wondered if the pilot made it to safety and tried to cover the area by moving the telescope around, but Phoebe became impatient and insisted that I return it to her immediately. After a time she said, "I can't see anything. Do you want to bet on the pilot?"

"What do you mean?"

"A thousand dollars that Poppa's slaves find him alive and put him in the pit." She shrugged. "If he's dead, you win."

"I wouldn't make such a bet," I said. "And I certainly don't have a thousand dollars."

Phoebe pulled a magnificent diamond and ruby ring from her index finger and slipped it onto my pinkie. "That should cover your side of the bet." She smiled mischievously and said, "Now we're engaged."

"I can't accept this," I said, handing her back the ring.

"Perhaps I made a mistake about you, Mr. Paul Orsatti."

"It's very beautiful, but I don't think your father — "

"He won't care. He's going to be too upset to care about anything, which means he won't be bothering too much about you." She took my hand, slipped the ring over my finger again.

"What do you mean?"

"There was another plane," Phoebe said. "Couldn't you hear it?"

"Yes, but I thought it might have been your father's."

Phoebe laughed at that, a soft, sexy, whispery laugh. "Not unless he was flying it. Or Morgan." She laughed again. "Or Uncle George."

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"You've got plenty of...slaves."

She seemed astonished. "Why, you couldn't allow a slave to fly an airplane."

"Why not?"

"Because...you just couldn't. But it doesn't matter. Poppa will surely find out who was flying that plane and what company he worked for and fix it all up. He always fixes everything up."

"You mean he'll have him killed."

She shook her head and looked genuinely hurt. "Poppa's an honorable man. He'll have him brought back here to live and give him everything he could want. We don't just go around murdering people, you know." When I didn't say anything, she asked, "Are you sorry?"

"About what?"

"What you said about my father."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry."

She turned back to me and asked, "Well, do you still want to kiss me?"

"I never said I wanted to kiss you."

But against all judgment — of course — I did.

PHOEBE AND I lay in bed. It was evening, and the garden was a fantasia of fairy lights. A sweetly scented breeze wafted in through the balcony, shadows and pale, milky lights played over a wall-sized Flemish tapestry of Neptune standing upon a shell and creating a horse of air with his trident. The walls were covered with blue brocade from Scalamandre, and the gilded wood ceiling glowed as if lit by fireflies. Phoebe was curled up beside me, and we were wrapped in smooth satin sheets as blue as the brocade.

"You see, everything is perfect," Phoebe said. "I knew it would be. I always know."

"Ah, so you always lure lonely prisoners into your den to have your way with them, is that it?"

"Exactly so." After a pause, she said, "How could you even imagine I would have anything to do with anyone else?"

There was nothing to say to that, so I enjoyed being close to her, feeling her smooth shoulder and slipping my hand down to caress her

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small breast. She was thin and long and smooth and as perfect as I had imagined.

"Well, just in case it might interest you, I've never had anything to do with anyone down there" — I knew she meant the pit — "or anyone who Poppa has brought to visit."

"So your father does have guests here," I said. "Doesn't he worry about security?" For an instant, Phoebe seemed to be nonplussed, but then she giggled and said, "Poppa worries about everything."

"What if they told their friends? Why — "

"They're very rich," Phoebe said. "Not nearly as rich as we are, of course, but they're worth quite a boodle, you can count on that. And Poppa could just as easily make their shares in the stock market go up or down. He can make it do whatever he wants. But you, Mr. Paul Rudolph Valentino Piano-player, you're like a big dog with a bone, aren't you? Now, do you *really* want to talk about Poppa's friends, or...."

She was quite persuasive; and I was indeed, in all respects, like a dog with a bone. "What was all that business about not getting to keep me until September?" I insisted. "What did your brother mean by that?"

She drew away from me and pulled the sheets up to her neck, as though she were wearing them as a nightgown. "You got what you want, so thanks for the buggy ride. And now you want to play twenty questions."

I tried to put my arm around her, but she turned away, taking most of the sheets with her. It suddenly felt cold in the room.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." I said. "I — "

"Then say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry."

She unraveled herself from the sheets and turned toward me. "I'm coming out in London in September. I'll be presented at court, and I'll meet King George. He's also a friend of Poppa's. Now does *that* answer your question?"

Of course it didn't; but I would bide my time. I nodded.

"Then you may have your way with me again."

But that wasn't to be either because there was a sharp knock on the door, followed by the booming voice of God.

"I'm not dressed, Poppa," Phoebe said sweetly, sitting up in the bed. She seemed to be talking to the polychrome sculpture of Saint John that

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was positioned beside the paneled door. "I'll meet you down in the library." She looked at me and shrugged.

"You'll open this door right now, young lady!"

"No I *won't!*"

I started to get up. I could grab my clothes, perhaps hide; but Phoebe said, "Don't be goofy. He'll go away in a minute. Absolutely-positively."

Then I heard Jefferson say something incomprehensible in a low voice — most likely, he was speaking to one of his slaves.

I was right.

I should have known better than to listen to Phoebe. Now it was too late.

A key turned in the lock, Robert pushed the great door open, and Master Randolph Estes Jefferson, dressed impeccably in formal eveningwear — white tie and tails — walked into the room. Phoebe was a blur rushing into the adjoining bathroom; it was a wonder she didn't slip on the blue, diamond-smooth floor. She slammed the door shut and left me to face the music by myself. There was nothing I could do but pull the sheets around me. My clothes were strewn across the floor.

Passion had certainly taken precedence over foresight.

"Do you see what happens, Robert, when you leave guests unattended?" Master Jefferson spoke to his slave in English.

Robert nodded and looked at me as if I were the wayward child and he was the parent.

"Well, good evening, Mr. Orsatti," Jefferson said. "I see that you have already provided my daughter with her first lesson. I will expect you to attend to my daughter's musical education with as much ardor as you seem to have displayed here tonight." He lifted my undershorts with the toe of his polished leather spats and then kicked them across the room. "And I am expecting to see a marked improvement in her proficiency at the piano, Mr. Orsatti. In September, she will give a recital at Carnegie Hall. It's all arranged."

"Sir, don't you think that's a bit, er, premature...?"

Jefferson gave me a genial smile, his ruddy, fleshy face the picture of cheerfulness, his eyes as hard as the diamond mountain below us. "Wouldn't you say *this* is premature, sir?" he said, looking around the room, indicating my situation with a simple turn of his head. Then he

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nodded to Robert, who picked up my scattered clothes and laid them out neatly on the corner of the bed.

"You look perplexed, Mr. Orsatti," Jefferson continued. "Did you expect I would have you beaten? Or killed? Or thrown back into the pit with your colleagues? No, you're Phoebe's guest now. And Phoebe is a woman of the '20s. Why, she's practically emancipated."

"*Practically* emancipated?" Phoebe asked, opening her bathroom door a crack and peering out. The light behind her transformed her curly hair into a halo.

"Well, maybe you'd prefer to leave school and go to work for Mrs. Millie Scotch Barker and her suffragettes," Jefferson said. "But this is none of your business, young lady. You're taking your bath, are you not? while poor Mr. Orsatti must make his own introductions."

"For your information, her name isn't Millie Scotch Barker. It's Abby Scott Baker, and in case you've been too busy to notice, Poppa, we've won the right to vote."

"*You* don't have the right to vote, nor do I think you'd care to be poor."

"I know poor people at school," Phoebe said.

"Ah, yes, those poor girlfriends of yours who can't afford to keep their own staffs of servants.

"Well, I know Mr. Orsatti."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Orsatti, whom you're going to make as rich as Croesus, isn't that so?"

"If you have no objections, Poppa," Phoebe said meekly, then closed the bathroom door.

Jefferson chuckled and said, "Well, Croesus had better dress for dinner, hadn't he? When Robert is finished with you, Mr. Orsatti, he'll bring you to my library, and I will explain everything before we join the ladies. No, better yet, Robert, bring him to the theater. Do you like moving pictures, Mr. Orsatti...?"

Without waiting for an answer, Jefferson left, and Robert introduced me to my new bodyguard, Wordsworth, who had been waiting like a good foot soldier in the wood-paneled lobby. I learned that Isaac was being punished for a dereliction of duty, and I would not see him again. I wondered if *anyone* would ever see him again.

As Robert and Wordsworth escorted me out of the room, I could hear

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the faint splashing of water and Phoebe singing in a sweet, yet raucous voice — "Who's Sorry Now?"

Scrubbed down like a horse after a race, perfumed, pomaded, and dressed in evening clothes, I sat in the richly cushioned maroon seat beside Jefferson and watched Fatty Arbuckle and Buster Keaton slap each other across the screen.

Jefferson's "theater" was more magnificent than any movie house I'd ever been in. Scarlet damask lined the walls, and the thirty-foot ceiling was supported by huge gold caryatids holding dimly glowing ruby lamps. As the moving picture flickered before me like a dream, I sipped Napoleon brandy and smoked a sweet cigar rolled in the Haymarket district of New York City. But the butterfly collar that Robert had snapped around my neck was so heavily starched that I felt like I was wearing sandpaper.

"I think all that business about Fatty raping that actress and all is a lot of hooey," Jefferson said in a whisper, although there was no one but his manservants and us in the theater. This was certainly a place that inspired awe, a church for the brightly lit images that towered before us in profound silence. This was the perfect temple for the new gods that were so much larger than life and above the sound and the fury, beyond boredom or smell or homely sound. We might laugh at their antics, but *they* would have the last laugh and live forever. However, being here in this sumptuous palace atop a mountain of pure diamond, it would be easy to imagine that *we* were the new gods.

"Even if he did have a bit of fun with her," Jefferson continued, "it would have been her fault, not his. He didn't force her to stay at his hotel. He didn't force her to stay there for two of God's long days. And now the poor soul is blacklisted and can't make a moving picture because that stupid woman ruptured her bladder, probably from being loaded to the plimsoll."

"Well, she did die from it," I said as we watched Buster Keaton being struck by a sack of flour. Keaton absorbed the shock as if he had been struck by a hanky. I'd seen *Butcher Boy*, although I can't say it was one of my favorites. But Jefferson howled with laughter.

After he calmed down, he said, "The court cleared him of all charges, and the jury said that a great injustice had been done to him."

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"It did take three trials."

"I wouldn't care if it took a hundred trials. He was completely exonerated."

"I'm not sure that — "

"Are you going to continue to argue with me?" Jefferson asked. His voice was soft, mellifluous, and menacing.

"No, of course not. I apologize."

"From what Phoebe tells me, you're good at that." He laughed, whether at me or Fatty Arbuckle's antics, I couldn't tell; but he patted my arm, thus preserving my...dignity. "Perhaps I should get into the film business. What do you think? Give Arbuckle a second chance?"

"The press and public seem to hate him," I said.

He pulled on his cigar, belched a huge cloud of smoke, and said, "I can fix the press. And I can guarantee that the public will love him. I'll bet you a thousand dollars. Is it a bet?"

"I've already had a conversation like this once with your daughter, sir. I don't really *have* a thousand dollars."

"Ah, but you've got a new ring, haven't you?"

"I think we'd both be in the doghouse if I lost her ring to you on a wager."

Jefferson seemed to like that because he put his arm around me, waved the porter over to fill my snifter with more brandy, insisted that I stop acting like a teetotaler, and told me the "improbable but true" story of the Jefferson family.

When he finished, I asked, "Why are you telling me all this?" I had become more and more nervous as he spoke because...I already knew too much.

But he just handed our crystal — or perhaps they were diamond — snifters to one of his servants and said, "Because you're part of the family now, Paul.

"Shall we join the ladies...?"

Six

Randolph Estes Jefferson was no relative of Thomas Jefferson.

Nor was he the scion of any distinguished lineage. His father Frances

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Tiberio Jefferson did, however, settle in Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia, where the third president of the United States was born and grew up; and he claimed to be a distant cousin of "Thomas," who also had a reputation of being able to talk a tree out of its roots. Frances won a medal for "World's Greatest Liar" at the Great Albemarle Fair. Like Thomas, he was a states' rights man and distinguished himself in the War of Yankee Aggression by rising to the rank of Colonel. He was too robust to succumb to the diseases that routed both the northern and southern armies, and rose quickly through the thinning ranks.

After the war, he took his pay and his gift of gab and became the most successful auctioneer in Albemarle County; but he was too restless for that.

It happened that he found twenty-five "orphans," ex-slaves still living on a played-out plantation. Their owners had put the plantation up for sale and left for Europe. The men and women left behind spoke high German, had developed their own, unique dialect, and didn't know that the North had won the war and that they were no longer...slaves. They were starving and Frances fed them, gained their trust, and promised them wealth and a piece of land out west.

However, he neglected to explain that they were emancipated.

And so Frances left the Thomas Jefferson Auctioneers & Feed Company to his brother. His plan was to buy twenty parcels of cheap Montana land in the names of his new wards and start a cattle and sheep farm. But that was not to be because, after a series of misadventures, all he had left were his orphans; and they were starting to have doubts about the master who could do no wrong.

In fact, they would have probably killed him if he had not gotten lost in the mountains and shot a squirrel that happened to have a perfect diamond the size of a pebble in its mouth. That pebble would be worth a hundred thousand dollars. He went back to his camp and told his orphans that he had discovered a cache of "rhinestones" that could be mined "for a few dollars." Since none of the slaves had ever seen a diamond, much less owned one, they agreed that they could dig out enough stones to get back sufficient money to buy homesteads.

Leaving his miners to continue their work, he took a valise of diamonds to Billings; but he underestimated their value and a jeweler,

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flabbergasted at the size and quality of one of the smallest stones, tried to have Frances arrested. Frances went to New York, where he started another furor; this with only one stone, which a dealer of consequence believed might have been part of the Duvergier Diamond, said to have been stolen by a French soldier from the eye of an idol. The Duvergier had been cut into twenty-one stones, which ranged from less than a carat to eighty carats, and The World's Greatest Liar did not dispute the opinion that *his* diamond might have been cut from the same venerable stone.

After several weeks, Frances was several hundred thousand dollars richer. But he had to leave New York, as the metropolitan police were now looking for him. The diamond market was in chaos. Some said that the world's largest diamonds were somehow being cut up and "dumped by a "syndicate." These new stones *had* to be cut from great diamonds such as the Orloff, the Koh-i-nor, the Akbar Shah, the Dudley, and even the Cullinan — which became part of the crown jewels — because they were too big to be anything else. Madness had replaced logic. Would-be prospectors were rushing to Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Southampton, Long Island — and the yellow rags kept proclaiming new locations where diamonds had "just been discovered."

Indeed, The World's Greatest Liar had found what was undoubtedly the world's largest diamond...a solid and perfect mountain of diamond; and he realized that he would have to be careful, lest he devalue the world market.

He sent for his brother to manage the mine and left for a tour of the world. Carefully, he sold his diamonds. He used pseudonyms, forged passports. He lived like a criminal on the lam, yet he sold his stones to emperors, kings, criminals, sultans, and mercantile barons; his diamonds became invested with their own history and myth, as if they had been in circulation for hundreds, if not thousands of years.

In a few years, Frances was worth millions.

In a few more years, he was worth billions.

And he married a Spanish beauty; had two sons, Randolph and George; convinced his slaves that the South had indeed won the war, and that all was once again right with the world; murdered his brother, who became too generous with the family fortune and "talked out of school";

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and dedicated himself to protecting his family and consolidating his fortune.

Randolph, being a chip off the old block, also invested widely and wisely; saw to the construction of his castle on the mountain; married a woman from Braga, his mother's village near the west coast of Spain; sired a son and two daughters; and being kinder and gentler than Frances, merely imprisoned his overly generous and voluble brother, rather than murdering him.

Thus was I introduced to the secrets of the family while titans who had assumed the shapes of Fatty Arbuckle and Buster Keaton beat and kicked each other in joyous, rapturous revenge.

Seven

It was like being invited to dinner in a cathedral, perhaps because great pennons hung from the high, gilded wood ceilings and paintings of winged cherubs and Rubenesque angels gazed down upon the guests, as though the heavenly host itself were in attendance. Perhaps it was the plundered sixteenth-century choir stalls, or the flickering candles and the altar of a table spread with linen and silver and gold. The plates and glassware seemed to be composed of layers of ruby, sapphire, emerald, opal, and diamond. Muted colors and pure, prismatic reflections met my eyes wherever I looked, and the Persian tile upon which I stood seemed to have infinite depth, as if this great room was floating stock-steady upon extraordinarily deep water. Servants glided in and out, as though stepping through shadows, and I could hear the clear but distant strains of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. I tried to locate the music, but could not.

Randolph Jefferson stood at the head of the long table and motioned me toward a chair beside Phoebe, who was dressed like a blond angel in white chiffon. Beside Phoebe, and facing Jefferson at the other end of the table, sat a beautiful dark-haired woman wearing a black chiffon evening dress. I thought it particular that, except for a gold wedding band, she wore no jewelry. She looked like she could have been in mourning. To Jefferson's right was Morgan, and beside Morgan was a homely brown-haired girl in a stylish green evening outfit that somehow seemed larger than she was.

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"Paul, allow me to introduce you to Giroma, my wife." I bowed, and the woman in black held out her hand to me. I wasn't sure whether I was expected to kiss it or formally shake it, so I decided upon the latter. She seemed pleased, but then she turned away from me, as though impatient to return to her own thoughts.

"And my son, Morgan, who tells me y'all met under rather unexpected circumstances." Jefferson gave Morgan a cold, disapproving look and then introduced me to Marion, his eldest daughter, who was still being overwhelmed by her green evening dress. Perhaps I had been too hasty in describing Marion as homely. She had the same features as Phoebe, but they were slightly...crooked. What seemed like perfection in one sister was bland and uncomely in the other.

"Sit down," Phoebe whispered to me. "You look like you just stepped on your own foot." Marion giggled at that and, embarrassed, I sat down.

We made small talk throughout dinner, all seven courses, and Phoebe was winsome and witty and wickedly pressed her leg against my thigh. I asked about the music, wondering how many more musicians — indeed, how many other "guests" might be on the grounds — only to learn that the sweet music was being reproduced by an electrical phonograph that used a new Panatrope loud-speaker.

"It's the bass that fools you, Paul," Jefferson said. "It's big as life, don't you agree? The old orthophonic machines aren't a patch on this one. The diaphragm of the loudspeaker is coil-driven, the acetate records are finely grooved, and the stylus is diamond, of course. The Victor Talking Machine Company will be bringing out a version like this...sometime in the next four or five years, I would suppose." Jefferson seemed very pleased with himself.

I nodded, unsettled that I was the only guest. Phoebe's sister Marion must have been reading my mind because she complained, "It's not fair, Poppa, that Phoebe always receives special treatment. She's coming out before me, and I'm older. And you've allowed *her* to have company. I haven't had *any* company this summer." While Phoebe's voice was smooth, dulcet, Marion's was whiny.

"Phoebe has company for a reason," Jefferson said. "Would you have her give her concert unprepared?"

"She's never going to be prepared," Marion said, looking defiantly at

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Phoebe, who stared assiduously into her jeweled plate, as though she could move the broccoli by the mere power of her gaze. "She can't play the piano any better than I can, yet you've bought Carnegie Hall for her."

"I did no such thing," Jefferson said. "She was *invited* to play, as you might have been if you had applied yourself."

"She only wanted to play piano because I did. And y'all went gaga over *her* and couldn't even be bothered with me."

"That's not true."

"It is too. It's because Phoebe is a liar. She lies to all of you, and you believe everything she tells you. It's not fair, it's just not fair."

"Are you quite finished?"

"I'm sick of being here all by myself."

"You have your family here, or is that of no importance to you?"

Marion shook her head and said, "It's not fair."

"I'll spend time with her, Poppa," Phoebe said. "I will, Marion, I promise."

"That's the bunk!" Marion said to her father. "She's a liar."

"Morgan, what do you have to say?" Jefferson asked.

"Don't know, I — "

"She's your sister, and it's your responsibility to take care of her, isn't that right?"

"Yes...I suppose, but — "

"Well, I've decided that you should follow up our little problem with the pilot who got away from us," Jefferson said. "What do you think of that? It's time you proved yourself to be a man."

"What do you want me to do?" Morgan asked.

"More to the point, what do *you* think you should do?"

"I dunno...go find him, I guess."

"And what does that have to do with me?" Marion asked. "You see, that's just what I mean. I'm invisible."

"Not at all," Jefferson said. "You're the eldest. Perhaps I should send *you* out to test your mettle instead of Morgan."

"Perhaps you should send *me*," Phoebe said. "Mr. Orsatti could protect me."

"Indeed he could," Jefferson said. "Indeed he could," and they exchanged teasing looks, as if they had rehearsed this little skit — as if

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Mother and Morgan and Marion were out, and only Poppa and Phoebe were in.

And I soon found out where I stood in their dangerous little universe.

"Oh, Poppa wouldn't send either one of them to the grocer for a loaf of bread," Phoebe confided to me as we stood on the artificially lit, glaucous-green lawn that seemed to roll on forever into the night.

Fireflies pulsed in the perfumed air. I held her cool hand; and I must admit that against all logic and experience and plain good sense, I was head over heels in love. It wasn't about what kind of a person Phoebe might be — how smart, immature, spoiled, and selfish she was. I knew her for a brat, and probably as dangerous as her father. Perhaps more dangerous. But she was...perfect. The sound of her voice was perfect, the way her eyes narrowed when she was thinking was perfect, her smell, the cast of her hair, the way her eyebrows arched, the curl of her mouth — all absolute perfection. I was smitten, but at least I had the presence of mind to conceal the extent of my ardor...or so I thought, anyway. In fact, I was as transparent as the goblet I had been drinking from at dinner.

"I'm surprised that he lets either one of them go to school," she continued.

"You don't like Morgan and Marion very much, do you?"

"*Au contraire*, I love them both to pieces. But would *you* let them out of your sight?"

"I'd rather not let you out of my sight."

She giggled and pulled me to a copse of trees that were silver and shadow in the dim, flickering lamplight. She sat down, her back against the bole of an elm.

"You'll catch cold on the damp ground," I said.

"Poppa will go alone," she said, as though talking to herself. "He won't take Morgan. I'll bet you a thousand — "

"Don't start that again."

"Did Poppa try to make a bet with you?"

"Why do you ask?"

She twirled the ring on my finger...the ring she had given me. "I expect he noticed my ring. Well, did he?"

"Did he notice...?"

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"No, did he make you put it up for collateral?"

"I would never bet your ring."

"Good for you," Phoebe said. "Poppa likes you."

"He didn't suggest sending *me* to find your flier."

"But he did take you out of the pit."

"Because you asked him to."

"And you'd just better remember that," she said, and then allowed me to fumble with her clothes, caress her breasts, kiss her in all the delicious, unmentionable places, and finally make love to her. Everything was rustling and whispering and breathing, and when we were finished — and still half-dressed — she said, "You haven't said you love me."

Caught off guard, I just smoked my cigarette.

"And you didn't offer *me* a cigarette."

I gave her the cigarette, which she smoked, inhaling deeply. She didn't cough...she just cleared her throat, as though she were about to give a formal speech. "Well, are you going to say it?"

"How could you be sure I'd mean it?"

"Because I know you do."

"And what about you?"

"Do you think I'd let you do what you just did if I didn't?"

I knew better than to fall into that trap.

"I love you," I said, trying to arouse her again.

"I know you do," Phoebe said, surrendering, or pretending to.

"But there is something else."

Phoebe pulled away and watched me.

"You've had company here before. Your sister said as much."

"Ah, so we're on that old stick again."

"Well, I still can't get what your father said out of my mind."

"And what would that be?" Phoebe sat up again and leaned against the tree. Her blouse was open, her hair was mussed, and I must admit I could not imagine anyone being more beautiful, alluring, and piquant.

"That unless you behave, you won't be able to keep me until September."

"Morgan said that, remember? And he lies."

"I need to know," I said, insistent.

"I've only had one friend from school ever visit me for vacation," Phoebe said. "A girlfriend. And you wouldn't have liked her, anyway."

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"Why?"

"You just wouldn't. *I* didn't like her very much. I...."

"Yes...?"

"That's all. Now, are you done with your Twenty Questions?"

"Does your sister usually have guests?" I asked.

"So now it's Forty Questions, is it," Phoebe said, and she buttoned her blouse.

I felt the sudden distance between us, but I couldn't stop. "Well, does she?"

"Yes, this is the first summer she's been alone. Poppa's punishing her."

"Why?"

"Because she has a big mouth. She takes after Uncle George." She looked around, and although she didn't act nervous, I knew she was. I could feel it radiating from her.

"Your father doesn't let your guests return home, does he." That was a statement, not a question.

"What do you want from me?" Phoebe asked.

"The truth."

"Why? Will it make you free?"

I waited for an answer.

Phoebe looked directly at me as she spoke, as if the truth would be a reproach. "You're right...Father doesn't allow the guests to return home."

Then he imprisons them, like he did me?"

"No," she whispered, watching, studying me. "That wouldn't be fair to the family."

"The family?"

"To us."

"Why?"

"Because we'd feel terrible. Mother would have a breakdown. She's had one already."

"So you *murder* them?"

She flinched at that, but kept looking at me, unafraid yet vulnerable. "There is no — there is really no other choice. Marion and Morgan need friends. And Poppa is too considerate to force them to be hermits."

"Considerate? I — "

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"You'd think we starved and tortured them," Phoebe said. "Invited guests are shown every courtesy. They have the best time of their lives — good company, good food, the best quarters, and Marion and Morgan and Mother shower them with presents. Whatever they fancy they get, and when their time comes, they simply go to sleep. It's really very pleasant, I would imagine. It really is.... It always happens in August or September, but Marion and Morgan never know exactly when. It's easier for them, that way."

"And what about their poor families?" I asked, aghast.

"We explain that they caught typhus and passed away, and Poppa *always* sends flowers."

"How lovely. And when is my time going to be, hey? This month or next."

"Well, you do have to give me lessons for my recital," Phoebe said. She was playing with me, yet I was convinced that she had told me the truth. Jefferson would never allow anyone to give up his secrets. It was a miracle that he allowed his brother George to live — perhaps he was a trifle sentimental.

I got up to leave, and she said, "If you go now, I'll never speak to you again."

"What's the difference?"

"What's the *difference*...? Do you seriously believe I would bring my friends here, knowing Poppa wasn't going to allow them to leave?"

"Well, you have. *I'm* your guest. Or rather your victim."

"Go fly a kite! You were going to rot down there in the pit."

"But I wouldn't be about to be murdered. Is it this week or next?"

"I wouldn't allow Poppa to murder you. He agreed that when you're finished tutoring me for my recital, you'll go back in the pit. So there! I wouldn't kill anybody. Not even you."

I could hear her breathing falter like she was going to cry, but I persisted. "But you have, haven't you? You've probably had as many guests as Marion. Or Morgan. Or your mother, for that matter."

"Mother never has guests, neither does Poppa," Phoebe said. "They allow us to have guests because there's no other choice. Mother stays by herself and barely speaks, or haven't you noticed? She lost her best friends, and couldn't stand to lose any more."

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"It's disgusting."

"We're not like other people. We can't live like they do. If we could, we would. And for your information, Mister Know-it-all, when I found out what Poppa had to do, I refused to invite anybody else ever again. I'm content to read and enjoy music and walk in the gardens. Alone."

"That's very white of you."

"Thank you."

With that, I turned and walked away.

Half-dressed and shoeless, she caught up with me.

"Paul, do you really believe I could abide you being killed or put back with those other...men?"

"I don't really know," I said. "I would guess that you could."

"I love you. I didn't know that when I saw you in the pit, or when I heard you play the piano like a genius. And Poppa would never hurt anyone in the family."

"I'm your piano teacher, Phoebe. I'm not in the family."

"But you will be when we're married...."

Eight

Phoebe was, of course, correct. Her father left the mountain by himself to take care of business. It seemed that eight pilots had already been murdered by his agents, yet none of Jefferson's sources could be absolutely sure that the right pilot had been dispatched. Jefferson was going to take matters into his own hands and direct his army of spies, scouts, facilitators, lawyers, bankers, and mercenaries to find the "conspirators," wipe them out, and smooth over the facts so that no one would ever recollect that anything odd or untoward had ever occurred. Whether Jefferson was a good general, a coward, or just foolhardy, I couldn't say. But when the shooting started and all hell broke loose, he should have been present.

However, I'm getting a bit ahead of myself....

The next few weeks were bliss. Just Phoebe and me. There were long, languorous hours in the mirror gallery, the afternoon sun a dusty-golden mist filling the long, arched room as Phoebe concentrated on her

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music...and me. She was going to dedicate her recital to me and play a selection of my favorite piano works by Erik Satie. I tried to talk her into playing a selection of Chopin's waltzes and preludes and explained that Satie's music was absurdist and humorous and only seemingly simple, but she was not to be dissuaded. The hours of practice were punctuated by lovemaking and champagne lunches on the balcony. She disappeared the slaves. They were to be invisible, yet at her beck and call, as it should be, she said; and she was summer itself. Every day another Phoebe appeared, as though by magic. Sometimes she was an Egyptian queen in evening gown. Sometimes a chic matron wearing cloche hats and "Coco" Chanel skirts and pullovers and suits designed specifically for her and no one else. She could be "Flapper Jane" with heavy makeup and oiled hair and whiskey on her breath, or an athletic fresh-faced beauty in pleated skirt and blue bandeau.

And so the days passed, each delicious, each one only slightly different from those before. We swam in a green pool illuminated by ivory lamps under a ceiling of hammered gold. Surrounded by marble Roman sarcophagi and statues of Sekhmet, the Egyptian goddess of war and destruction, we made love. We had dinner with the family and made small talk; we hardly saw Morgan and Marion, who were sullen and secretive, as if they were privy to something we were not.

I found out what *that* was all about a few nights later.

ALTHOUGH PHOEBE and I made love every night, we slept in our respective rooms. "When we're married, you can stay the night," she said; and, indeed, by midnight I would be so exhausted from the rigors of the night — and the day — that I would fall into a deep, satisfying sleep, only to be awakened by Robert with breakfast on a gold tray and the bright, pure light of another perfect morning.

But on the night when all hell broke loose, I was dreaming of the boys in the pit. I was back there with them, and so was Joel, who was dead, of course. But in the dream, we were all dead — except Phoebe and old man Jefferson and Morgan and Marion, who were all dressed in formal finery and standing on the golf course above us by the grated opening of the pit. Jefferson was praying for us and mixing up the part about dust to dust, and

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then Phoebe started crying while her brother and sister began shoveling dirt into the pit to bury us. There would be no more golden days and luminous nights with Phoebe, no more lovemaking in Jefferson's forests of gold and glades of diamonds, no more Bach or Beethoven, nor the ironic mockings of Satie. I could smell grass and rot and decay, the Paris perfume of Phoebe mixed with her sweet sweat as the clumps of black soil fell on top of us. Black rain. Phoebe's tears, tapping, dropping like soft leather heels on marble.

I choked. I couldn't breathe. I —

Woke up to scuffing, whispering, creaking. Then the click of the diamond doorknob being turned, the sighing of the door. I didn't wait to determine who the intruders were because I was sure they were going to try to kill me, just as they killed all the other guests. But I couldn't escape without somehow getting past them. Unless....

I felt for the button on the wall beside my bed and pressed it hard. The bed tilted and drapes parted with hardly a sound as I slid down the chute into the empty bath. The aquarium walls of the bathroom were a luminous green, and as I hastily made my way out, I could see the shadow of a ray swimming toward me. I turned the knob on the bathroom door. It wasn't locked, and I made my escape down the stairs. Indeed, my first thought was to go directly to Phoebe's room on the other side of the house. I certainly wanted to, but for all that I loved her, could I really trust her? She was, after all, a Jefferson; and I was, after all, just a guest, a guest who even now could not help but be awed by the pre-dawn magic of this house; by the cathedral walls covered with medieval tapestries; by the loitering stone and marble fauns, naiads, satyrs, soldiers, gorgons, gods, and goddesses, all pale as moonlight and bigger than life; by the carved ceilings so high above; by the emerald and turquoise rooms that each opened into other, even more magnificent rooms. Tall, jeweled lamps cast a roseate light, and pitch-velvet shadows concealed treasures that could only be imagined.

I rushed toward the atrium, where I thought I would escape into the gardens.

And I heard Phoebe screaming hysterically. "You'd better not have killed him. He'd *better* be alive."

I retraced my steps and waited behind an archway near the ivory

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staircase. I wasn't surprised to see slaves pacing nervously on the landing above. Wordsworth and Isaac had obviously been sent to kill me, and perhaps Isaac had been given his chance to get back into the family's good graces.

But I *was* surprised to see Morgan step out of my room onto the landing; a very angry Phoebe was right behind him. I suppose Morgan had finally found his courage, although he seemed to have lost it again in Phoebe's presence.

"What the hell did you think you're doing, Morgan?" she shouted. Her voice seemed magnified by the dark, cavernous spaces. "He's my guest, you little twit, and what happens to him is *my* decision, not yours. Or Marion's."

"Marion has nothing to do with this," Morgan said. "It was all my idea. I just wanted to help you."

"Help me?"

"Anybody can see how much you're stuck on him, and you know Father isn't going to let you keep him, no matter what. He told me that before he left."

"Did not."

"He did too, and he practically told me to take care of things for him while he's gone because the more you fall in love with him, the more you're going to be hurt. And Marion thought that — "

"That's just what I thought," Phoebe said, but she did not continue because at just that moment everyone looked up into the grayness above, as though we could see through the ceiling. We could hear the sound of aircraft overhead, and then there was a terrible concussion. I felt heat and was thrown backward. The ceiling shattered. The archway cracked and fell in a cloud of red dust and smoke before me.

More explosions.

Bombs falling, and I remembered my dream. Clumps of black soil falling. Black rain. Phoebe's tears. And, indeed, I was drenched. Water poured through cracks in what was left of the ceiling, which would soon give way; and the swimming sharks and rays and groupers and cuttlefish would fall onto the jewel-polished floor below.

Somehow, I had to rescue Phoebe, lest she be caught in the inevitable waterfall, a vertical tidal wave that would smash and splinter the balcony

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like balsa wood; but as I called out to her, my voice was swallowed by the staccato thunder-pumping of machine guns above. At least the slaves had the presence of mind to stand and fight. As I ran to the grand staircase, I met Marion and Morgan. We stopped for an instant, amid the cacophony of exploding bombs, machine guns, and the abdominal groaning of the castle. Water dripped like rain through the cracking and bulging ceiling high above. Morgan scowled at me, Marion called me a filthy something, and then I ran up the stairs to Phoebe while they, presumably, ran to the bunkers where they would be safe and sound and fitted out with champagne and caviar until the danger was over.

"Phoebe," I shouted, catching the back of her. She was running through the corridor, which curved around the inside of the house like a mullah's ledge on a minaret. She heard me over the firing of machine guns and the thrumming shaking deafening exploding of bombs.

She stopped and shouted, "Mother," which I understood as code for "I've got to find Mother," and then disappeared into one of the many branching corridors. I followed her, my eyes and nose burning from smoke.

"You've got to — "

I meant "You've got to get off this floor now immediately run," but I seemed to run right through my words. I was intent on grabbing her up and getting out of the house, into the bunkers, perhaps, off this mountain; and then, in those heart-pounding exploding acrid smoke-smelling seconds I imagined that we'd somehow miraculously escaped from the mountain, from her father and family and everything associated with them, and I wondered whether she could live in the real world five minutes with me, without the insulation of millions — or billions — of dollars. It was idiocy even to dream of getting out, much less turning Phoebe into Suzy Housewife. In spite of the smoke and sudden heat, for the house was certainly on fire, although I couldn't see flames...yet, I think I grinned at the thought. But if I had the chance, the split-second chance of a lifetime, I'd take Phoebe away, without a dime in my pocket, I'd take her away for as long as she'd stand me.

But there *was* a chance. I was, after all, a prisoner. If the air strike was successful, as I imagined it would be, then we would all be set free. The lads in the Pit would vouch for me. Perhaps there was a way to escape. To

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hide Phoebe, take enough diamonds and rubies to keep us more than comfortable in our new life.

Nonsense madness lunacy, yet those words had little meaning deep in this castle of impossibility where ceilings were layered with gold and walls of diamond and ruby glowed translucently like dreams in the deepest sleep; where hammerhead sharks could fall like rain, and God's machines could play music as well as orchestras.

I found Phoebe in her mother's suite, which was the size of most people's houses, and Phoebe turned to me and said, "She wouldn't've gone to the bunkers on her own, how could Morgan and Marion leave without her?" Phoebe was wild-eyed. "They hate her, that's why."

"Why wouldn't your mother go to the bunkers?" I asked, trying to bring her back to reason.

"She's claustrophobic. She can't stand darkness, can't stand to be without windows and light and — "

The sound of gunfire, the ceiling cracking, the house groaning, and then the expected waterfall, complete with all manner of fishes. Water poured over us, for the aquarium was two stories high, an aquatic crystalline house within the house, and I grabbed Phoebe and ran through the rain and wriggling, flapping, slapping fishes as the floors and walls and ceilings collapsed behind me, ran until I found another staircase, a narrow *escalier dérobé*. The smell of wet ash was thick as we ran down the stairs, ran through the undecorated corridors used by servants, ran straight into blazing, blistering fire.

We found another way, which was blocked by the debris that had been ceiling and furniture, only moments ago. Coughing, panicking, we raced through darkness; now I was following Phoebe, who pulled me by the hand, down, down, into the damp stone cellars where we felt our way along the rough cold walls. Then an incline, the clanging of a heavy latch — Phoebe had found an exit. We pushed open a heavy door and looked up through the swirling smoke and soot to glimpse the dawn-pink sky.

The attack had been planned perfectly.

From an emplacement on the roof of an adjacent building...another burst of anti-aircraft guns. I could see only a few bodies of slaves scattered across the lawn; but in the dawn pinkness of this impossible morning, I couldn't see blood; nor could I smell the puke and feces of dying men,

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thank God, for the reek of gasoline, the acrid smoke, and the thunderstorm and metal odor of machine-guns firing on the roofs above were overpowering. I took a chance and stepped away from the castle to see what was in the sky; and you could've knocked me over with your pinky because the attackers-invaders-saviors, whatever they were, had just about everything in the air that could fly, all remainders from the war. Christ, there was a Vickers Gunbus, which hadn't been in service since 1916; and its gunner was strafing the slave quarters with his moveable Lewis machine gun. There were several Jennys in the sky, and from the sound of it, I guessed they had been fitted out with 7.7 mm machine guns, just like the Gunbus. The Jenny was the favorite of most barnstormers, and I was no exception. While everything was happening around me — all the crashing and burning and exploding, I daydreamed about whisking Phoebe away in a Jenny, saving her from all this death and destruction; and I felt a sudden, unexpected rush of happiness. I would be saved, wouldn't have to spend my life a prisoner, or worse, become another one of those poisoned or strangled guests buried in an unmarked grave in the shallow soil of the diamond mountain. All that in a second, just like when I'd been in combat in the *Toulouse-the-Wreck*, the Spad that got me through Bloody April without so much as a bullet tearing through its delicate frame. I was again smelling oil and gasoline, hearing the peculiar and particular chinking sound of machine guns, and daydreaming. Time stretching, then collapsing, while my body, my hands and eyes, made all the moves.

Phoebe caught my arm, as though she had just read my mind and discovered my true thoughts of escaping with the enemy, and that's when I saw the twin-engined Handley Page 400, a British bomber that could carry a bomb load of around 1,800 pounds — Lord knows how they got their hands on *that*, and again, daydreaming, I wondered who they were. The bomber made a wide circle, and I asked Phoebe where the bunkers were because once that Handley Page started dropping her guts, there wouldn't be much left to talk about.

"Look," Phoebe said, pointing, and, indeed, I saw slaves scrambling across the courtyard and leap-frogging up the inlaid tile perrons of the castle. They moved like trained and disciplined soldiers; the strafing fire of machine guns didn't deter them, even when two slaves were hit and fell backward over the stone steps.

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We had to get out of here. I could hear the Handley Page's engines change tune as the great plane turned to begin its bombing run.

And then Phoebe shouted "Momma," and ran into the courtyard.

Sure enough, there was Giroma Jefferson strolling absently in her black chiffon evening dress embroidered with tiny beads.

I followed, but was too late: the Gunbus was strafing the courtyard, and in that second I felt time stretch out like some terrible gasoline-tainted gray wodge of taffy, wrapping itself around me...suffocating me. I saw Phoebe's mother fall, hit by the strafing fire, and Phoebe screaming and falling on top of her; and then it was like being in the cockpit of my Spad again, feeling once again absolutely focused yet numb, as I did during every dogfight. The numbness was fear, but it was a distant thing; and — as if I were a spectator still standing in the doorway of Jefferson's castle — I could see myself pulling Phoebe away from her mother and dragging her out of the courtyard. Phoebe screamed and tried to bite me before she came to her senses.

"I can't leave my mother," she said desperately. "She might be alive, mightn't she?"

"No, darling," I said, "but don't think about that right now. We'll think about everything once you're safe. Now tell me where the bunkers are."

"There," and she pointed toward a strand of rocks where goats were trying to hide in the surrounding brush. "But we can't leave without Mother." So I picked up Mrs. Jefferson, who was just skin and bones, and we made our way under cover of the pine forest that was the west edge of Jefferson's zoo. I glimpsed zebras standing stock still, as if they were painted sculptures. Like Lot's wife, Phoebe looked back, seeking one last glimpse of paradise, and then we felt the concussion of an exploding bomb. For a few seconds, I could only hear a rushing, windy sound. I wasn't sure if the castle remained, as it was out of our sight from here; and we made our way, circuitously — keeping under cover — to the bunker. Phoebe pulled at an iron bar set cleverly into the rock — the camouflaged opening could only be detected if one already knew where it was — but nothing happened. I pulled the bar. Still nothing.

"They're in there, and they can hear us," Phoebe said to me. Turning to the cliff face of the bunker, she shouted, "Open the goddamn door,

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Morgan, you bastard. Mother's dead, and it's your fault."

But Morgan, if he was inside, was silent as the stone.

Nine

We laid Mrs. Jefferson out in the family mausoleum between the marble sepulchers of her father-in-law, the World's Greatest Liar, and his brother, who was murdered for the family cause. The cacophony of machine guns and bombs was reduced to great sighs and groans; only the dead held sway in this great marble shrine at the end of the gardens, and they ruled imperiously over the spiders and dust. Phoebe and I — and the cold and stiffening Mrs. Jefferson — were dwarfed by loggia of fifty-foot columns and pavilions that supported hordes of stone beasts and angels; and a huge equestrian statue of a Jefferson glowered down upon us like a marble god in his adamantine heaven. But there were no glowing onyx or pearl walls here, and not a diamond or a ruby or a sapphire in sight. This grand tomb might well have been designed by Phoebe's mother, who defied her wealth by never wearing a jewel. Perhaps she was the only one in the family who understood that you couldn't take it with you.

"I can't leave her here like this," Phoebe said, her eyes glistening with tears, and at that moment I felt I was more in love with her than ever before.

"It's not safe here."

"Pah! It's not safe anywhere," she said, suddenly gaining the weight and wisdom of the world.

"I'm getting you away from here this very minute," I said, and she turned to me, her face lit by anger and perhaps even hatred.

"That's my mother lying dead there, and you want to...you want to...."

"I want to get you to safety."

"You're as flat as my brother," she said, "and I'm not leaving."

"Then what *do* you propose to do?" I asked, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice. She turned away from me, leaned over her mother's corpse, and began to cry softly.

"It's all over. "

She allowed me to put my arms around her and pull her away from her

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mother. "Poppa should have been here. He should have saved us. But he's too interested in...." She looked up at me and said, "*You* should have saved us. So what are we to do now, Mr. Orsatti?"

She turned back to her mother, as though she could somehow find all the answers behind those dead and closed eyes. She was shivering, trembling; and then, by sheer act of will, I should imagine, she straightened up and became absolutely calm. Her eyes narrowed in determination, and I saw her father in her heart-shaped perfect face. I saw in that instant the inevitability that she — and not her brother or sister or anyone else — would control everything. She was her father's daughter; and love her as I did, I felt the sudden panicky urge to flee.

"I'm *not* giving everything up," Phoebe said firmly to her dead mother. "I won't, and they can't make me." Then she finally turned to me and said, "Well...?"

"Well, what?" I asked, and for that instant I felt like a nervous schoolboy. The muffled booming of bombs and the thick bursts of machine guns became louder. "We've got to get out of here right now!"

"Will you help me or not?" she asked, ignoring my last remark.

"Help you to do *what*?"

She stepped across the flawless marble floor and reached behind the stone sarcophagus of the World's Greatest Liar and strained as she pulled something. "Well, are you just going to stand there?"

She stepped back and allowed me to squeeze into the space behind the marble coffin. I felt the smooth metal bar she had been pulling at, which was ingeniously hidden under the curl of the coffin's lower rail, and released it without straining my back. The coffin slowly and smoothly slid down toward the wall, as if by magic, to reveal a dark catacomb fronted by dirty marble steps.

"Go on," Phoebe said; and when she saw my hesitation, she said, "Are you afraid I'd close you in?"

I must admit that a nervous thought had crossed my mind.

"Maybe I should, but I wouldn't," and she grinned at me, as if she'd forgotten everything for an instant; then she took a last look at her mother, and led me down the steps and into the pit. She picked up a lantern from a ledge and scratched a match. Once the lantern radiated a halo of buttery light, she pulled at something in the wall. A rumbling echoed through

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what I imagined to be countless corridors, a hellish maze from which we would never escape; and I wanted to run back up the stone steps before the entrance was sealed. But the coffin fit into place like the last stone block of a pharaoh's tomb. The darkness seemed to sharpen my sense of smell. I breathed in the musty odors of the grave, and I was sure that this was a catacomb in the true sense — that bodies had been left to rot on shelves like the one where Phoebe had found her matches and lantern.

"Follow me," Phoebe said.

"What on Earth is this place?" I asked.

"You'll see."

"It's where your guests end up, isn't it?"

"Well, it's where *you* ended up."

"Answer me."

"I don't approve of overbearing men."

"Oh, I'm so very sorry," I said sarcastically. She hurried ahead, but I kept close to her. Our voices and movements echoed through the crudely cut corridor. "This place certainly wasn't cut out of diamond."

"Of course not, silly," Phoebe said. "The whole mountain isn't one big diamond."

"Your father said it was."

"Well, he's like my grandfather. He exaggerates. About two-thirds of the mountain is one big diamond. The rest is this stuff, regular stone, I would suppose."

"And where does it lead?"

"Well, you're going to find out now, aren't you?" Phoebe said peevishly. Perhaps she was as frightened as I was, although I doubted that. She had obviously been here before. Probably many times. I shivered, swore, and slapped at something that had dropped onto my neck. Phoebe waved her lantern, which was smoking.

"Lots of spiders in this part. I hate them, don't you?" Phoebe said, quickening the pace.

I heard a screeing sound.

"And bats," she continued.

Which meant that there was another opening. But I was not relieved yet. We came to a terminus of sorts, and I heard water dripping and the distant rumbling of machinery. Phoebe led me through another corridor,

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which became narrower and narrower; her lantern threw cascading shadows across the rough-cut walls...and the reinforced metal doorway ahead.

Turning a large combination lock, which would unbolt the heavy door, she said, "We'll be fine now." The door was three feet thick; I'd only seen its kind in bank vaults. I helped her pull it open, and we were bathed in the dim but steady light that emanated from the opalescent walls and ceiling. I felt like I was back in the pit. There were no shadows in this place. We had entered a two-dimensional realm.

Phoebe led me through a long corridor that opened into a large storeroom filled with rifles, machine guns, shotguns, pistols, flamethrowers, grenades and grenade launchers, all manner of knives and swords and bayonets, pull carts, sledge hammers, wire cutters, welding and carpenter's tools, cables, foodstuffs, canteens, medications, bandages, stretchers, gas masks, and canister weapons I didn't even recognize. "I think Poppa said this place is as secure as the bunker. Anyway, everything we need is right here."

"What are you looking for?" I asked warily, following her as she walked up one aisle and down another.

"You're the veteran of the Great War. You tell me." She walked on, then stopped and picked up what might have been a grenade. Behind her were shelves of gas masks and medicines: bleach ointments, clouded glass bottles of petrol, methylated spirits, kerosene, liquid paraffin, and carbon tetrachloride. There were swabs and eye drops and bandages and a metal mask with holes. I knew what *that* was for...what all that was for: mustard gas poisoning.

"No," I said, realizing that I had shouted. "No."

"We could gas them when they get out of their planes," Phoebe said excitedly, almost cheerfully. She walked a few paces down the aisle, stopped, and picked up what looked like an ordinary grenade launcher. Finding it unexpectedly heavy, she nearly dropped it. "Here, we can use these tubes to shoot them off with. I think these go with the gas grenades. Poppa showed me once, but I'm not so sure now."

"I won't have any part of cold-blooded murder."

Phoebe raised her eyebrow slightly, as if mystified. "I don't want to *kill* them, just put them to sleep for a while." Then her face reddened and

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she said, "What do you think they did to Mother...and our servants? Well...?"

I nodded — there was nothing I could say to that — and examined the canister she had been holding, and the others neatly laid out on the gunmetal shelves like condiments for a deadly banquet. "Well, you'll certainly put them to sleep for a good long while with this. It's phosgene, for Chrissakes. The Germans used it at Ypres in 1915." I *thought* I could smell a faint odor of new mown hay, which is a dead giveaway for phosgene. "If I can smell it, something must be leaking. Let's get *out* of here now."

"I like the smell, don't you?" Phoebe said, teasing me.

"Phoebe!"

"Phoebe what, you flat tire. How could you believe for even one second that I would actually consider killing those men?" She seemed to be about to break into tears. "Well, I don't need your help, after all. I can do it myself."

"What? Kill all those aviators? And how do you propose to do that all alone? You could get a few of them, I'll admit, but not all of them."

"I told you I'm not going to kill *any* of them," Phoebe said, and she looked so angry that I thought she might actually stamp her foot. Or throw the canister at me. "Come over here."

"We need to get out of here," I said. "We've probably already poisoned ourselves."

"Well, I've been down here only about two hundred times, and it always smells like this, and I'm still alive, so stop being a stupid coward."

I felt my ears burn.

She walked over to me and asked in almost a whisper, "Are you going to trust me?"

After a time I said, "Yes," and put my arms around her.

"Then you'll help me?"

"Of course I will." I felt the last tuggings of my conscience and wondered if, indeed, I would be killing those aviators.... For those few seconds as I held Phoebe close, I could hear her shallow breathing and the ever so faint booming of bombs.

And somehow I *knew* I was making a great mistake....

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Then she kissed me, tenderly but without passion, and said, "Let's get ready. If you can pile up the little gas bombs and the tubes, I'll try to get us some more help."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know the way to the servants' quarters," Phoebe said, "and I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that some of the servants are using the tunnels like bunkers. If they're there, I'll find them."

"I should be with you."

"No, we've got to make sure the enemy doesn't land before we can get out there. If you just keep following the tunnels to your right, you'll come to the outside. Don't worry, I'll find you somewhere between here and there." Phoebe nodded toward a corridor that curved to the right. The light made the far wall and the branching corridors look flat, as though the tunnels, as Phoebe called them, had been lightly sketched with a charcoal pencil. Phoebe turned and looked back toward where we had come. She seemed to be staring at something only she could see, and her eyes were bright with tears.

"Phoebe...."

"They killed her," she said, meaning her mother, and then she disappeared into the flat light. I called after her, and her voice echoed back, "Make sure you take the right bombs."

And I wondered once again if the *right* bombs would be lethal.

I FOLLOWED PHOEBE'S directions, kept turning to the right, and navigated the warren of corridors until I reached a camouflaged opening in the hill west of the château. Phoebe and I had spent many a perfect hour watching the zebras play and frolic through these gently inclined fields, and the sweet fragrances of spring flowers and Phoebe's perfume were cold memories as I looked out at the devastation before me. It was a clear morning with just a touch of chill...and the smells of oil and metal. Through the copses of evergreens and oak, I could see the blackened château and the ruined grounds of what the Old Man had called his enchanted hill. A streamer of smoke rose from the castle's west wing, yet, miraculously, most of the castle was untouched. A bomb had obliterated the Neptune pool and the great Grecian marble steps.

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Above, in the blue, ceramic sky, planes circled like buzzing insects waiting their turn to land.

We were probably too late. At least half the planes would already be on the ground and the aviators, probably armed to the teeth, would be making their way to the château. I had enough gas canisters in the pull cart to asphyxiate half the population of Chicago. I waited for Phoebe and had begun to worry when I heard footsteps. Phoebe had indeed found a squad of servants, including Robert, who, surely, was too old and decrepit for this kind of operation. Yet he stood in front of the other slaves.

"We're ready," Phoebe said, looking at me determinedly, as if waiting for me to respond with the proper etiquette. She stood away from me, waiting, testing me, and I knew if I didn't respond properly, I would lose her forever.

I nodded to Robert and asked him if he knew how to launch the gas grenades.

"Yes, Mr. Orsatti, I certainly do, and so do my men."

"Your men?" I asked, glancing at Phoebe, who did not seem disturbed, just anxious to get underway.

"Yes, I trained them. Under Mr. Jefferson's orders, of course."

"And who trained you?" I asked.

"I believe he was an ordnance sergeant, whom Mr. Jefferson invited for a visit. Miss Phoebe took quite a shine to him, if I remember correctly." There was an underlying meanness in his soft, pliant voice; and it was obvious that he viewed my condescension as intolerable. "Isn't that so, Miss Phoebe?"

Ignoring him, Phoebe asked me if I was ready.

I nodded and picked up a grenade. Robert did the same, and attached it to the launcher; indeed, he knew what he was doing. He then picked up a gas mask from the pull cart and pulled it over his face to be at the ready. The others followed in turn. Before Phoebe could pull her gas mask over her face, I said, "Phoebe, why don't you stay — "

"Don't even suggest it," she said.

Moving quickly, we made our way under cover toward the landing strip north of the château. I deployed the men along the way with orders to fire if they saw the enemy, even if there were other slaves nearby who might inhale the gas — after all, the grenades *should* not kill.

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However, there was no time to wait and ponder.

By the time we reached the rocky outcrops near the landing strip, we were in the thick of it. Half a dozen pilots were already making their way toward the château, and they were armed and at the ready. They saw us at the same time we saw them, and we both took cover. They began firing, and Isaac calmly launched a grenade at them, which exploded with a low thumping sound. I watched through smeary goggles and heard my breath wheezing through the mask, which smelled of rubber and formaldehyde. After a few moments, the aviators stopped firing. We waited and then moved forward cautiously. I feared the worst, but when we examined them, they were indeed still breathing; one pilot was snoring, as if happily tucked into his bed. We wasted no time pulling the sleepers under cover so they could not be seen. Then we moved forward to keep an eye on the planes as they landed. They kept a tight formation. Impressive. As each plane taxied down the turf of the golf-course runway, the pilots who had just landed stayed close to provide possible covering fire. We waited behind copses of weeping willows. It was too easy to gas the aviators, take their weapons, and drag them under cover — we were shooting the proverbial ducks in a barrel — and like everything that seems too easy, there was a snag. We miscalculated.

One of the aviators had somehow managed to get past us and circle around to our rear. He was wearing one of our gas masks, which he must have taken from one of the servants on the way; and he shot three of our servants with his automatic rifle before we could retaliate. To my surprise, Phoebe shot him squarely through the forehead with a handgun.

Robert sprayed the area with machine-gun fire and ordered his squad of servants to move forward.

More gunfire and the chuff chuffing of canister.

Then silence, a heavy awkward silence, as though some sort of geologic time or consensual dream had been replaced by a darker, more sinister reality.

As we moved forward, I could see faint wisps of gas roiling in the fetid air. Above me was a clear blue sky, as innocent as day. I looked around for Phoebe, but she had suddenly disappeared. "Robert, where's Phoebe?" I asked, and then I heard a series of shots from the trees behind us. Each shot seemed to be timed.

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Robert just looked at me.
Of course, he knew....
And a moment later, so did I.

I found Phoebe beyond the landing strip near the cover of trees and brush. Facemask and goggles hid most of her perfect face...it was as if someone else was committing the terrible deed.

"Stop!" I shouted, my voice muffled by my own gas mask.

Phoebe looked up at me blankly, raised her rifle reflexively toward my chest...and I felt strong arms lift me into the air as my own rifle clattered to the ground.

Isaac — the slave who had been my "bodyguard" — didn't relax his hold on me, even while Phoebe calmly continued to execute the sleeping pilots.

Ten

"I can't believe that she has received any of my messages," I said.

Robert lowered his great wrinkled head and said, "All you have sent has been received by Miss Jefferson." He stood before my makeshift bed in the guest library where I'd been imprisoned...upon Miss Jefferson's orders.

Isaac stood by the door, his bulk taking up most of the doorway.

The north wing had survived intact, and I wondered why I was being kept here. Perhaps the other rooms, the bedrooms, had secret exits. Or perhaps Robert was right and Phoebe thought I'd keep myself occupied with her father's books and the Steinway grand piano that sat like a great white gold-crested bird in the center of the library. I'd practiced most of the days and nights; the suppleness had returned to my fingers, and I indulged myself with Berg's atonalities and the cloying wretchedness of Mahler's *lieder*. Jefferson's collection of leather-bound volumes and first editions were, indeed, glorious, and it had taken me two weeks to replace the books back on the shelves in alphabetical order. It was as if an earthquake had struck the château, or what remained of it.

"Will there be anything else you wish this morning, Mr. Orsatti?" Robert asked. "A bath, perhaps...? I've laid out your clothes, just in case." He bowed and smiled condescendingly.

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"Just in case of what?" I asked.

"Why, in case you might wish to change, sir."

I waved him away. The door clicked shut, the key turned in the lock, and I was alone. I had not shaved, nor bathed. My hair needed trimming, my pajamas smelled as sour as my breath, and I was wallowing in self-pity. I didn't feel like reading, studying, or even playing, which was most unusual. Instead I mused on the possibilities of escape. I had tried everything I could think of, from picking the door lock (impossible!), to working the bars loose on the high windows, to holding Robert hostage — but somehow the old servant had managed to break two of my ribs before Isaac overpowered me — and all I had accomplished trying to get past the bars was to break the window glass.

So Robert had won, and I had lost.

We both knew that he was not my servant. But I was certainly his prisoner.

To add insult to injury, it was yet another magnificent morning. Golden sunlight poured in from the gardens, and the grounds were alive with hammering and shouting and the grinding and creaking and groaning of heavy machinery. The château was being repaired...rebuilt, and I had been imprisoned in this room for almost two months.

At least when I was in the Pit I had had company....

I padded back and forth barefoot on the Persian carpets. I examined Jefferson's astonishing collection of Greek vases that were secured to the hand-carved bookcases in case there might be an earthquake. Well, there *was* an earthquake, and it originated in the skies! I plonked my fingers over the keys as I passed the piano. I took a bit of toast and bacon from the silver tray Isaac had laid on an overly ornate gilt bronze table designed by Pelagio Palagi. I picked up my rose porcelain coffee cup and paced.

I had ruined everything....

No, *Phoebe* had ruined everything.

I wolfed down breakfast and swore once again that if Phoebe ever had the gall to come anywhere near me, I would —

There was a light tapping on the door.

I knew who it was. I *knew*....

"Go away."

A key turned in the lock, the doorknob turned, and the door groaned

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open. Phoebe stood in the doorway, looking small, uncertain, and breathtakingly lovely. She wore a simple pleated blue skirt with a white pullover. Her blond hair was pulled back, rolled, and tied with a golden ribbon that was the same color as the gilded trefoil arches over my prison bar windows. She stepped into the room, leaving the door ajar. Her face colored as she looked at me. She lowered her eyes, then, as if catching herself, looked directly at me.

"Where are your bodyguards?" I asked, more harshly than I'd anticipated. "Surely they're waiting in the hall in case I try something funny."

"What could you try that would be funny?" she asked in a low voice, and for only an instant, there was merriment in her eyes, which were bright, as though she'd been crying.

"What do you want?"

"What do you think...?"

"Don't answer my question with a question. You at least owe me an explanation. I've been in here for...months."

"I don't owe anybody an explanation, and you've only been here for five weeks and a day," she said, then looked down at the carpet again. "I'm sorry, Paul. I'm getting this all wrong...."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, sitting down on the end of the long gold brocade couch. My eggs were glassy-looking in the plate on the table before me. My coffee was cold, but I drank it anyway; I felt awkward, as I always did around her, and I needed something to do with my hands. After the coffee, I lit a cigarette, and Phoebe asked if she could have one, too. She bent over me while I lit her cigarette, and I could smell her perfume, see the light in her hair, and I caught my breath.

"Please don't be angry with me," she said, standing behind the table, as though afraid to sit down beside me. I gestured her to do so, but she stood her ground, closed her eyes for a beat, then said, as if reciting, "I had no choice but.... No, that's no good. None of it's any good." Then she sat down and against all my better judgment, I was caught by her...again. But she didn't seem to know. Her eyes filled with tears and she said, "How you must hate me."

I moved toward her, then caught myself. "I don't hate you."

"Yes, you do. I remember how you looked at me. I'll never forget the horror and disgust on your face. I — "

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I didn't say anything.

"But I have to live with what I've done. Somehow...."

I could only nod.

"I've tried to come up with a way to tell you, to explain. Every day I prepared a speech, but I...I just couldn't."

"So you just left me here to rot."

"I told Robert to look after you."

"You know what *that* means," I said.

She nodded, and I saw that she had used too much rouge on her cheeks to give her color; her perfect, dimpled face looked strained, and I detected worry lines on the corners of her pale blue eyes. "I know...I was selfish, but I couldn't think. I didn't want to lose you, so I — "

"Yes, Phoebe, we know what you did. Now what do you want to tell me?" Those words sounded cruel, even to my ears, and I regretted them immediately. Foolishly, stupidly, impossibly, I didn't want to lose her. It didn't matter what she had done.

Too late. She stood up, as if I had slapped her. "Yes, of course, you're right."

"What do you want to tell me?" I asked quickly, and I found myself standing also.

"I want to tell you that...I don't know. I can't do it now. It was a terrible mistake — " and she turned to run out the door.

I caught her, held her close, and although her breath was ragged, she didn't cry. She stiffened, then rested her face against mine and said, "All right, I can tell you now. I don't regret killing those men. I didn't then. I don't now. I know I was wrong, I know I'll burn in hell forever, God forgive me, but they *murdered* Momma. I couldn't help it. It was like someone else was killing them, even while I was doing it. Maybe it was because I found out about Father, maybe — "

"What about your father?" I asked.

She pulled away from me and sat back down on the couch. She took a puff on her cigarette, which was still burning in the ashtray, as was mine. The smoke roiled in the sunlight like clouds, or gas. "I'll tell you everything, but I need to know...."

"What...?"

"I know you can't forgive me, but will you listen?"

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"Yes, I just told you that."

"I'll tell you everything," Phoebe repeated, "but...."

"But what?" I asked.

She shook her head, and tears stained her makeup. Then she straightened up, composed herself, and said, "I kept you here because I love you. Selfishly. I knew you'd try to escape. I was even going to give you a choice. I was going to ask you whether you'd rather go back down to the Pit to be with your friends." She laughed, puffed her cigarette, and smashed it out in the ashtray.

"But you weren't going to let me be your confidant and stay with you."

"I...I needed time to — "

Instead of listening, I went on, caught up in my own anger. "And you certainly weren't going to let me leave the mountain."

"No," she said. "I'm crazy about you, but I'm not stupid. God help me, I'm my father's daughter." Before I could say anything, she continued. "I had to work things out. I told you...I needed time."

"You could have come to me anytime," I said.

She nodded. "I've tried...every single day. I guess I can now. Now that Father is back."

I felt a chill tickle down my spine. It was over. All over. If Jefferson was back in charge, he'd figure a way to dispose of me sooner rather than later...once he got around Phoebe. Or perhaps he wouldn't even have to do that.

"No, Paul, you don't understand," Phoebe said. "Will you come with me? And then you can decide."

"Decide what?" I asked. "Whether to stay up here or go back to the Pit?"

But Phoebe was waiting for me at the door...as were Robert and Isaac.

I must have been favoring my right side a bit as we walked because Phoebe asked me what was the matter. I glanced at Robert, then asked, "Didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Phoebe asked.

"Ask *him*."

"Well, Robert...?"

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He started talking to her in dialect, but I interrupted. "In English, Robert."

So Robert explained that he had broken my ribs — by mistake — and Phoebe dismissed him then and there. Isaac, however, was retained, presumably to guard me from Phoebe. I couldn't help gloating, and defended Robert as my servant.

"You see, you're learning," Phoebe said to me as we climbed the servants' staircase to the third floor. She unlocked the door to old man Jefferson's bedroom and study, which was surprisingly modest...except for the wildly ornate Spanish ceiling crafted from gilded wood and an eighteenth-century bed with a satin canopy and matching bedspread. There was a simple desk and cushioned chair beside the bed, a small fireplace that needed cleaning, and family portraits on the walls. The desk was piled with papers and an odd mechanism that seemed to sit on the desk but was supported by what looked like a drainpipe that disappeared into the floor. There were folders on the floor around the desk and the pipe, along with women's underclothing and various scattered skirts and dresses. Obviously Phoebe's. "I've taken Poppa's room," she continued. "It's a bit messy, but that's because I won't allow the servants in here." With that she pushed the door closed on Isaac. "You see, now I'm alone with you and at your mercy."

I nodded and she apologized.

"No need," I said, but she had already forgotten and was rummaging for something in the covers of her bed.

"Here they are," she said, finding what she was looking for: a large envelope containing photographs of her father and a dark-haired, finely featured girl. "You see, she's younger than me. Can you beat that? It's the bunk. The fucking bunk."

I was surprised, as I'd never heard Phoebe swear before, but she just glared at those photographs and blinked back tears.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Poppa's whore, that's who she is. Mother's dead because of her. Poppa promised that he'd make her a film star. Here, look for yourself," and she took a handful of letters from the desk and practically threw them at me.

"Easy," I said. "I'm not the enemy."

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"Maybe you are...maybe you aren't. We'll see, won't we?"

As I glanced at the embarrassingly fraught yet boastful love letters, Phoebe continued. "Her name is Greta Gustafsson, but Poppa changed her name to Garbo because he thought Gustafsson sounded like it could be a Jew name, although anybody would know it was Scandinavian. And he hired his pervert friend Mauritz Stiller to pimp for her. Do you know who he is?"

I confessed I didn't.

"He made that sex film *Erotikon* back in 1920."

I shrugged.

"Poppa showed it to me in the theater. He laughed all the way through it. It wasn't that bad, I suppose, but it was trash. Like her." Phoebe took the photographs from me. "Well, her career is down the drain. I've seen to *that*."

"What have you done?"

"Taken Poppa back, the filthy snake in the grass double-crossing, double-dealing — "

"Phoebe...."

She hunched over the bed and wept. "He murdered Mother and sold us out. The dirty bastard." Then she shook her head, tried to smile at me, and said, "I found it all out from Uncle George."

"Uncle George?" I asked. "He's crazy...and he's in the Pit."

"He knows more than you think. He's got ways of knowing everything, and the slaves trust him. It was Robert who passed on his messages, and because of you, I've probably lost a good slave forever."

"Because of *me*?"

"Well, slave or not, he shouldn't've broken your ribs and treated you like a bump."

"Phoebe, about your father?"

"He sold us all out. He brought in the planes and the bombs and the gunfire. After he changed his name and converted most of the money."

"I can't believe he'd do all that, just for a little bit of cheesecake."

"It was getting too dangerous to keep the mountain," Phoebe said. "Uncle George explained it all to me. It was so simple. Father allowed that pilot to get away from us, or could have allowed it, anyway. Once the mountain was found out, then the market for diamonds would crash,

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which is why Poppa started putting his money into...radium. Now he thought that would be perfectly safe, but he was wrong about that, too." She paused and stared at the contraption on the desk. "Poppa thought of most everything, I've got to hand him that. He'd even made sure that two of the aviators who tried to invade us were reporters, just to make certain that the word got out properly."

"It doesn't make sense that he would give up everything," I said.

"Did you read those letters?"

"Still...."

"And he wasn't giving up hardly anything. Only us. He'd end up with more money than he had, once the government clamped down on the diamond market, which Uncle George says would certainly happen. Poppa has hidden diamonds everywhere you could imagine."

"I can't imagine he'd harm his family. And family tradition was so important to him."

She chuckled. "So was his freedom, and he figured that we'd be let off. He probably also figured we'd all be safe in the bunkers. But he knew Mother wouldn't go to the bunker because of her claustrophobia. He *knew* that, and he killed her just as sure as if he pulled the trigger."

"But he came back," I said.

"Yes, Paul. I *brought* him back."

"How?"

"Uncle George. He knows everything Poppa knows. He and I...became Poppa, and used the slaves and his contacts to chase him down. We caught him buck naked with his mistress. I've got more photographs, but Uncle George is against letting the press have them."

"I should imagine he would be."

"And so am I...of course."

I nodded and watched her walk over to the desk and adjust the contraption.

"Come here, Paul, and I'll show you how Poppa kept an eye on everything."

I followed her to the desk, and she turned a switch that engaged gears below us — I could hear them shift. She directed me to look into the concave glass that covered the large pipe. For an instant everything looked ghostly and smeary, as if I were gazing at a crystal ball, and then my eyes

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grew accustomed to the images. I was looking into a room lit by uniform light. Looking down. Looking at Randolph Estes Jefferson, the old man himself. God.

"Can you see him?" Phoebe asked.

I nodded, fascinated. The room looked slightly askew, curved somehow, as if the edges were being pulled upward.

"It's hard to see sometimes."

"What's he *doing*?" I asked. He seemed to be kneeling beside his bed, except the bed was transparent as a diamond.

"That's the biggest diamond in the world...except for the mountain, of course," Phoebe said.

"Is he praying to it?"

Phoebe laughed mirthlessly. "He asked to have it sent down. It was all he wanted."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it's perfect," Phoebe said. "Poppa has had I don't know how many diamond cutters working on it. They're all in the tunnels."

"You mean they're dead," I said.

She nodded.

I gazed at the stone, which seemed to be suffused with blue light.

"He calls it God's Blue, and I don't know what he's doing with it now. I eavesdropped on him when I first sent it down. He tried making some sort of deal with God. If God would turn everything around like it was before he left, he would give up all his sins and build God a diamond cathedral. Silly, but I guess he's quite mad." She looked at me — I could feel her staring at me — and said, "But no more mad than the rest of us, I suppose."

"Are you just going to leave him there?" I asked.

"Until he drops dead," Phoebe said quietly.

"Have you talked to him?"

"I'll never speak to him again, but Uncle George visits him regularly and makes sure he eats."

"The other men will kill him."

"No, they can't get to him. Poppa is perfectly safe." After a pause, Phoebe asked if I wanted to say hello to Uncle George. She turned one switch on and another off and said, "Hello, Uncle George."

I could see Uncle George looking straight up at us. He had been

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fiddling with his trains, which were all speeding around the miniature countryside with great electrical abandon.

"Hello, Phoebe."

"He can't see us," Phoebe said.

"Phoebe...are you there?" George asked.

"Yes, I'm here, and so is Paul Orsatti."

"Aha, so you've finally gotten up the courage to pop the question."

"Not yet, Uncle George," Phoebe said.

"Ah...? So why then are you calling me?"

"To ask you to come up and help us."

"You're doing just fine, Phoebe," George said. "You don't need me up there. You've got Paul.... Hi, Paul."

"Hi, George," I said.

"No, I had more than enough of 'up there' when I was up there. Now stop watching me walk around in my underwear and fix things up with Paul. Bye, Paul."

"Bye, George," I said.

Phoebe clicked off the contraption.

"Well?" I asked. "What did George mean about popping the question?"

"What do you think he meant?"

"Stop it, Phoebe, and answer me."

"It's just what you probably think." She looked intently at the carpet and whispered, "Do you want to marry me?"

I was going to say yes immediately, but something caught in my throat. I wanted to rush to her, envelop her in my arms, and protect her. She was the pearl beyond price, the object of my desire. She looked perfect standing before me, her ribbon golden in the sunlight streaming through arched windows, her face flawless; and yet suddenly she seemed...flat, featureless like the denizens of dreams, dangerous creatures that suddenly appear, that *look* familiar, but are something else entirely.

Phoebe looked pale and white and fragile. She looked up at me and said, "You see...? There, I have your answer."

"I haven't said *anything* yet."

"Which says it all, doesn't it."

"No," I said. "I love you."

"But...."

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"No buts."

"Then you'll marry me...?"

I nodded and started to move toward her, but she took a step backward.

"And you'd be willing to live here?" she asked.

"You mean as a prisoner?"

"No, as my husband."

"Would I be a prisoner?"

"You would be my husband," she said; and I felt a thrill of possibility...that I would be with her, but more than that...that I could change things, I could —

"And as my husband, you would respect the way things are," Phoebe said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The way we live...the way we are."

"Of course, but we can make things better."

She looked away from me, as if considering. Then she said, "We *will* make things better. It's already happening. I'm rebuilding everything Poppa and those pilots destroyed. I hate pilots — except for you, darling." She smiled at me, as though I had provided her with all the answers. "We could make everything ever so much better. Poppa didn't think smart enough. We'll camouflage everything, so even if planes fly overhead, they won't see anything but rocks. Of course, it won't be rocks." She hugged me and said, "You're brilliant. I'll tell Uncle George about your idea, and he'll figure out how to do it. He won't want to stay down there in the Pit anymore. He *loves* to solve problems...."

Phoebe must have seen something register on my face because she stopped talking and gave me a quizzical look. "But that wasn't what you meant, was it? So who *do* you want to make things better for?" she demanded. "The servants? The prisoners in the Pit?"

"Both, for a start." I understood then that this mountain was the only thing that was real for Phoebe. She would never leave it for very long...or change it.

Her eyes suddenly became moist. "Poppa told me you'd be as selfish and greedy as all the rest of them." She turned away from me and walked out the door.

And I realized that I still loved her more than ever.

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Eleven

I shouted "Pung" and concentrated on our game of mah-jongg while Uncle George's Lionel trains steamed and clattered around us. George was a good player...and he'd assured me that Phoebe would probably take me back once I saw the light of reason.

It was simply a matter of time...and conscience.

"Yeah, but he's still *an intellectual lightweight!"*

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Plumage From Pegasus

Paul Di Filippo

Woolpullers, Inc.

"One thing to know about Kent Haruf, author of the novel *Plainsong*, is that he wrote the first draft of the book with a wool stocking cap pulled down over his eyes.... [H]is rather eccentric method was, he said, an effort to reach the emotional heart of his story unconstrained by the feeling that someone — an invisible critic — was watching over his shoulder and scrutinizing every word he chose."
—*The New York Times*, December 1, 1999.

THE WRITING game had gotten so bad for me, I'd even given my Invisible Critic a name. Edmund Wilson. He hovered constantly at my back, big as Harvey the Rabbit but much less pleasant company. Okay, so the nickname for my hallucination wasn't that original or clever. But that lack just reflected the depths of the neurotic pass I had reached. I simply couldn't get the words down on paper anymore, with any degree of creativity. Edmund Wilson had me stifled.

I knew I was on the road to perdition. Eventually I'd end up like so many other failed fiction writers, churning out salacious memoirs or vapid content for some e-zine. But then, at the nadir of my despair, I spotted an ad in the back pages of *The New York Review of Books* that promised a cure.

INVISIBLE CRITIC CRAMPING YOUR STYLE?
FOR INVINCIBLE CONFIDENCE, VISIT
WOOLPULLERS, INC.

My front door didn't touch the chair-worn seat of my trousers on the way out.

Woolpullers, Inc., occupied a modest office suite in one of the under-rented highrises downtown. A polite but unforthcoming receptionist invited me to supply lots of highly personal information about myself, which she entered into her terminal. But she refused to reveal

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the nature of the firm's anti-writer's-block treatment.

"Mr. MacArthur will explain everything to you."

I should mention that this otherwise-fashionable woman wore a cranberry-colored knitted stocking cap emblazoned with the firm's name and logo, the latter being a recursive image of a stocking cap. I spent a lot of time trying to avoid looking at this incongruous item of apparel — which made her resemble a rave kid who'd lost her pacifier — before I was summoned into Mr. MacArthur's office.

The neatly suited MacArthur also wore a crimson cap, which, combined with his hearty manner, modest potbelly and trim white beard, rendered him rather Santa-like. I was certain the effect was intentional, even cynically so, but felt myself relaxing nonetheless.

"Welcome, welcome, Paul! If I may be so bold as to call you by your first name, I hope you'll do the same and call me Grant."

"Hi, uh, Grant," I responded weakly, allowing myself to be conducted to a seat alongside a large desk. MacArthur dropped down into his own chair, then swiveled his computer monitor to face me. I regarded a screenful of confusing graphs, histograms and pie charts hopefully, but was soon put in my miserable place.

"Bad news, son. Based on the information you just provided us and according to our patented predictive WriterSoul™ software, you'll go from constipated to catatonic in less than six weeks. That is, unless you enroll in our treatment plan immediately."

MacArthur pivoted the screen away with a sad flourish, then composed his features into a receptive blank. I hesitated a moment, but eventually asked the expected question.

"Um, exactly what does your treatment consist of, Grant?"

MacArthur leaned forward and beamed. "Deception, Paul. Pure deception."

My puzzled expression was the only permission he needed to launch into his sales talk.

"You're naturally aware, Paul, that the entire practice of fiction involves deception. But I bet you've only thought about it from the audience's point of view. The famous 'willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of the reader, which convinces him for the duration of the reading experience that he is apprehending real, meaningful events. But what we at Woolpullers, Inc., have chosen to concentrate on

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is the self-deception that the author himself undergoes.

"You see, every author of fiction must convince himself first of all of the validity of his characters, the integrity of his narrative, the undisputable rightness of the story he is about to compose. Otherwise, lacking this belief, the writer is unable to go on. Everything falls apart, and out of the debris rises the Invisible Critic, whose stern authoritarian voice pooh-poohs all possible sentences on the basis that fiction writing is a meaningless, childish game."

I looked nervously over my shoulder to see how Edmund Wilson was taking this. Just like Mr. Coffee Nerves in the old ads whenever the smart housewife brought out decaffeinated Postum, he was beginning to go a little green around the gills.

"So you propose making me really believe again in the existential heft of my own work. Makes sense. But how do you go about such a confidence-building course?"

MacArthur leaned back in his chair, now that I was hooked, and folded his hands across his charming little tummy. "Drugs. Heavy-duty drugs that open you to the helpful remedial posthypnotic suggestions of our staff psychologists. Nothing illegal, mind you. Just the latest generation of psychotropic helpers out of the Prozac family."

"I could get a prescription for those from my HMO."

"True. But even the Screenwriters Guild HMO cannot take the next step that makes our services unique. We put all our writers into longterm artificial environments which encourage the necessary fantasies that supplement the drug regimen and paradoxically bolster your sense of your fiction's reality."

"For example?"

MacArthur pulled out a sheaf of glossy brochures. "Here's a popular one: *Faux Yaddo*. A simulated artist's colony where all the other residents are actors paid to praise your work in progress."

I scoped out the discreetly printed price at the bottom of the leaflet.

"That's beyond my means, I'm afraid."

"Well, here's a simpler construct, the *Thomas Wolfe* package. We set you up in a Depression-era Brooklyn apartment with a signed book contract from Scribner's. All the furniture is scaled down to make you feel as somatically big as Wolfe, so you can write standing up and using the top of the fridge as a desk,

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just like him. Most writers end up producing ten thousand words a day."

"I hate the city. What else do you have?"

Growing a little testy, MacArthur shuffled through the stack of leaflets before finally selecting one and setting it down triumphantly before me.

"I sense you're just the kind of misanthropic fellow who would appreciate this. It's called *Last Man on Earth*."

Everything clicked. "It's perfect! With no fear of my work ever being read by *anyone*, I could write anything!"

MacArthur smiled knowingly. "We have a deal with the Russians to use a portion of the depopulated Chechen Republic as a stageset. And in your case, besides planting strategic stashes of writing supplies, foodstuffs and medicines, we'll make sure there are dozens of pairs of eyeglasses with the proper prescription lenses scattered about, just to avoid the dreaded *Twilight Zone* phenomenon."

"Where do I sign?"

"Don't you need to ask your Invisible Critic's permission first?"

I looked behind me. A wailing, grimacing Edmund Wilson was fading out faster than an airport bestseller. Immensely relieved, I seized the opportunity and signed the contract MacArthur proffered.

"Congratulations. You'll have to come in a day early for us to apply the fake radiation sores. In the meantime, wear this with pride."

He handed me a red stocking cap. I snugged it on and pulled it down happily over my eyes.

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Albert Cowdrey is a writer of remarkable range: he deftly spins out tales of the supernatural such as "The Familiar" and "The Stalker," ripping science fiction adventures like "Mosh" and "Crux," and now he shows us how well he can handle John Collier-esque fantasies. Mr. Cowdrey lives in New Orleans, a place that feeds his imagination well.

Tomorrow

By Albert E. Cowdrey

ONE HOT, LATE-SUMMER DAY young Gaius Manilius turned his back on his native town and the serene sea and set out to climb the mountain that towered bluely in the distance, hoping to find the Sybil who lived among its upper crags.

Gaius's many friends thought him a decent sort, though a bit simple-minded, and they had always advised him to avoid the Sybil Althea. She speaks the truth but tells a lie, his friends had warned him. She sees the future, yet she doesn't dare interfere with the decrees of the Fates. So she plays with words. The things she predicts come true, but until they happen you won't know what she really meant.

Well, circumstances were forcing Gaius to ignore his friends' advice. His life had always been hard, for he was almost uneducated and his father, a retired centurion of the XII Legion, had gambled away the land he'd been given in lieu of a pension. Now truly terrible possibilities faced Gaius, and at the age of twenty-two he simply didn't know how to handle them.

For a time his way twisted along back roads, through farmlands full

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of morning sunlight. The mountain's lower slopes were also pleasant, green and thatched with wheatfields and groves of gray-leafed olive trees. Slaves paused at their work to watch him pass, and poor as he was, Gaius felt a comfortable sense of superiority, for he was a free man. And yet...

The sun was bright but his feelings darkened as he hastened on. Clouds hung over the mountaintop, and just so, he thought, a cloud hung over him. Poverty and debt, and if his debts couldn't be paid — well, he could be seized and a judgment rendered and he could be sold into slavery to satisfy his creditors. The ragged slaves in the fields, their bodies bent and twisted by hard labor and scant food and frequent thrashings, suddenly filled him with anxiety and fear.

The mountain was changing, too, becoming rocky and steep. The last fields ended where the slope turned suddenly upward. Brown pitted rocks projected through the waving wild grasses and the stunted pines. A flight of crows swept past, screaming in their own language. A warning perhaps? But Gaius had never learned to read the language of birds, not well anyway; he was a soldier's son, not a priest's or an augur's. He knew that seeing an eagle was lucky, and from time to time he paused to search the sky, but no eagle appeared to comfort him.

The way was hard now and he had to pause from time to time to catch his breath. Gaius had heard in the marketplace that a series of landmarks indicated the way to the Sybil's cave, and he noted the sights as he passed them: an abandoned olive grove, a great boulder, an oak in the shape of a humpbacked man, a hawk's nest hanging raggedly visible on a crag.

In a place truly wild and desolate he found the last marker, a shrine dedicated to Dis, lord of the underworld. That frightened him: there were people who worshipped Death. Gaius hesitated, momentarily afraid to go on. He looked around him and shivered. The trees and plants had taken on strange, otherworldly forms. They were stunted by the vapors emitted from the underworld, which had openings hereabout, cracks and windows into the land of great Dis and wan Proserpina and furious Até. Gaius could smell the sulfur in the air. Most of the trees had died, but wild grasses seemed to thrive in the rank mists that crept down the slopes at evening.

Only the thought of his father, a soldier afraid of nothing, nerved him to go on. Taking a deep breath, Gaius began to climb again, fighting as much against his own fears as against the steep, twisted way.

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All at once he emerged onto a sort of natural shelf, at whose back yawned a dark cave mouth overhung by vines. He halted, breathing hard, scarcely able to believe that he had found the place at last. Then a tall, thin woman wearing a dirty red traveling cloak emerged from the cave. Her gray hair fell to her waist and she combed it with long crooked fingers.

The Sybil Althea's first words were anything but prophetic.

"Get the mule!" she screeched like a crow, her voice harsh with long breathing of this tainted air. Then she saw Gaius. "Yes, yes?" she demanded.

Trembling, he came forward and sank onto his knees.

"Great Sybil," he said, "I've come to seek wisdom."

"Nobody wants wisdom," she snapped. "All they want is comfortable lies." She added, "Do you have any money?"

Still trembling, he detached a leather pouch from his belt and held it out to her. She swept toward him, trailing dusty garments, bringing odors of incense and smoke. She took the purse.

"Huh," she said, fingering the few *sestertii.* "You don't rate wisdom very high, my friend."

"Forgive me, great Sybil. I'm poor and desperate."

"Nothing new about that," she grunted. "Nine-tenths of the world could say the same."

At this moment a young slave woman emerged from the cave carrying a battered leather box, which she set down on the ground.

"I'll fetch the mule," she said, and hastened away, vanishing into a thicket of vines and thistles.

Meanwhile the Sybil seated herself on a boulder. "Normally I wouldn't take such a miserable fee," she told Gaius. "But I'm leaving on a trip and I suppose even a few bits of silver may come in handy."

Besides, she thought, I believe I can get a small additional fee from *you.*

The slave returned, leading a small mule already saddled. When she lifted the leather box to tie it behind the saddle, Gaius noted that she had large breasts under her garment of coarse sackcloth. Her face was clean and might have been pretty in some other life where she was prosperous and free.

"Now," said the Sybil, "tell me your troubles. *Briefly.*"

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Clumsily, Gaius explained. His father was dying of an illness no doctor could cure. Their money was gone. The old man owed the doctors, the landlord, the apothecary, and the wine shop. All these debts Gaius would inherit, and he had no way to pay. It was a time of peace; the legions weren't recruiting, and in any case his father had always told him he was too kind-hearted for the army life. He longed to marry, but who'd marry a pauper? At best he faced a future of hard labor, poor as a beggar's dog, competing with slaves who worked for nothing.

And there were worse possibilites. At any time, Gaius might be seized by his father's creditors and sold. If that was to be his fate, he wished to know it honestly so that he could kill himself. Suicide was honorable if done bravely for a good reason, and his father had always taught him to prefer death to humiliation.

The Sybil listened to his story and then said, in her abrupt way, "Drusilla, give this young man some water. Leave me," she added to Gaius. "I need silence and solitude in order to see what will come to pass."

So Gaius went into the cave with Drusilla, and the slave showed him where a little cold spring broke out of the earth and gave him a wooden cup to drink the water. The water tasted faintly of sulfur but it was cold and refreshing anyway.

"I didn't know there were springs here," he said when he had drunk.

"Oh, yes. There are springs of hot water and springs of cold water. There's a place not a hundred paces from here where hot water bubbles up and makes a natural *calidarium*. If you'd like a soak, there's plenty of time. *She* takes forever with her visions. She's getting old, you see."

After his long trek that sounded enticing. Gaius followed Drusilla out of the cave and down a narrow, stony path. The hot spring was in as wild and strange a place as he had ever seen, set all around with gray and brown rocks of contorted shapes swathed in brown dead vines. The pool lay in a natural bowl in the rock, surrounded with smooth, multicolored crusts of stone deposited by the steam that rose in wisps from its surface.

Drusilla helped him undress, as a slave should, and then took off her own shapeless garment and joined him to scrub his back with pumice.

"I should have brought some oil," she fretted. "But the last jug's been packed up. Madam Althea's determined to get moving today, though she never says why. Where are you from?"

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"Herculaneum."

"Ah, I knew you were a townsman. Your skin's beautiful. We country folks are all burnt by the sun and we have bodies like old gnarly trees."

She said this to force Gaius to look at her and see that she was lying. In fact, her face and hands were red and coarse but her body was white. Her breasts floated on the water like curds on milk, bobbing as she rubbed his shoulders and arms.

Gaius, a true Roman, thought that bathing was second only to love among the joys of life. *Amare, lavare, cantare,* the saying went — to love, to bathe, to sing.... His body relaxed, and for a little while his troubles dispersed with the handfuls of gray pumice that clouded the roiling spring and vanished. The water heated his blood, and instead of a harried debtor he was a young man alone with a tolerably pretty woman.

"You said Althea takes a long time to have her visions?" he murmured softly.

"A long, long time," said Drusilla, adding irrelevantly, "Living up here I see so few young fellows. Usually it's all rich old boys who pay madam big fees to be told they'll soon be even richer."

"How lucky they are," he whispered, lowering his face to the water and pressing his cheek against her breasts. "But I'm luckier still."

Almost an hour had passed when Gaius and Drusilla returned to the Sybil, both of them glowing with cleanliness and healthy exercise. Althea had gone to sleep on her boulder and she was snoring, slowly and rhythmically. The mule was browsing.

Drusilla woke the Sybil gently, whispering, "Madam, madam," until she opened her eyes.

"Ah, yes," she said. "And were you hospitable to the young man?"

"Oh yes, madam."

"I thought you would be. Now, Gaius Manilius, sit down at my feet and ask me three questions, for I will answer no more for the pittance you paid me. And be quick about it; I'd meant to be on the road by this hour."

In an instant all his anxieties returned. Gaius bit his lower lip. What exactly should he ask? Taking a deep breath, he began:

"Will my father die leaving me in debt?"

"Your father will die tomorrow and the death will be a cruel one. But

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at least it will be quick. No lingering. And his debts will be uncollectable, so you need not worry about them."

He almost wasted a question asking why the debts would be uncollectable. But he stopped himself in time, and asked instead:

"Will I ever be enslaved?"

"You will be a free man all your life."

He heaved a great sigh of relief and joy. It had been a long, hard trek up Mount Vesuvius, but the journey had brought him bodily pleasure and infinite relief of spirit. His thoughts instantly went to the future, and he asked:

"Will my life be a long one?"

"Very few people in Herculaneum — or in your great neighbor Pompeii, either — will live longer than you."

Joyfully, he leaped to his feet. Then, overcome, he fell to his knees and prostrated himself before the Sybil.

"May all the gods and goddesses bless you and your mighty wisdom," cried Gaius.

With a grim smile Althea rose stiffly to her feet.

"Drusilla, bring the mule," she said. "He's eating thistles and you know that fills his belly with gas."

To Gaius she said, "You may help me mount."

When she was settled comfortably in her sidesaddle, with the reins in her hands, she looked down at him for the last time. Knowing the future had turned her heart to gristle years ago, yet at times even she was troubled by the harshness of the Fates. Gaius's face was rosy and his dark eyes were shining and he seemed to radiate youth.

She muttered, "Twenty-two years old."

"Pardon?"

"I'm leaving this place forever," she said, "and so I'll give you a parting gift: two prophecies you haven't paid for. You will have at least one child, whether son or daughter I don't know yet. And when you go to Dis's kingdom you'll leave behind — what shall I say? Not a statue, exactly, but the mold from which a remarkable statue of you will later be made. Thousands of years from now, people will come from far countries to marvel at it."

She adjusted her saddle and the leather box, then turned the mule's

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head and set off at a slow pace. Drusilla smiled at Gaius, waved, and trotted after her, wiping a few tears from her eyes. He had time to draw no more than a dozen breaths before they vanished into the dying thickets and the outcroppings of old lava.

Gaius raised his fists and stood pressing them to his temples, trying to remember every detail of this, the most miraculous day of his life.

A statue!

Only the rich could afford statues. And people only came to gawk at the statues of the famous, or of the gods. Not only would he escape debt, not only would he remain free, not only would he marry and beget at least one child. He would also become rich and famous and be remembered for thousands of years!

How? He couldn't imagine. But with the Fates all things were possible. Slaves became emperors and emperors became slaves. The rich fell into poverty, the poor rose to opulence. Unbelievable things happened every day.

Slowly his sense of duty returned. Althea had predicted not only his own happiness but also his father's death. He must hasten home to see to his father's needs and, when tomorrow came, to ease his end. The old man must not die a cruel death, as Althea had prophesied — to that extent Gaius hoped to change the decrees of the Fates. If necessary, he would help his father open his veins, as a loving son should.

He started down the mountain, leaping like a goat. In the remote distance the afternoon sun was descending toward the blue Gulf of Naples and the Tyrrhenian Sea. Everything Gaius saw and heard — olive groves rustling in the evening breeze, cattle lowing, the sound of someone playing panpipes in the distance — promised a peaceful tomorrow.

Those fools who call themselves my friends! he thought. Telling lies about the Sybil. Could anybody have spoken more plainly, more honestly than she?

Descending the other side of the mountain, Althea chatted with her slave.

"What did you think of him, madam?" panted Drusilla, trotting behind the mule.

"Who?"

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"The young man, Gaius."

"A decent sort," said the Sybil. "Perhaps a bit simple-minded."

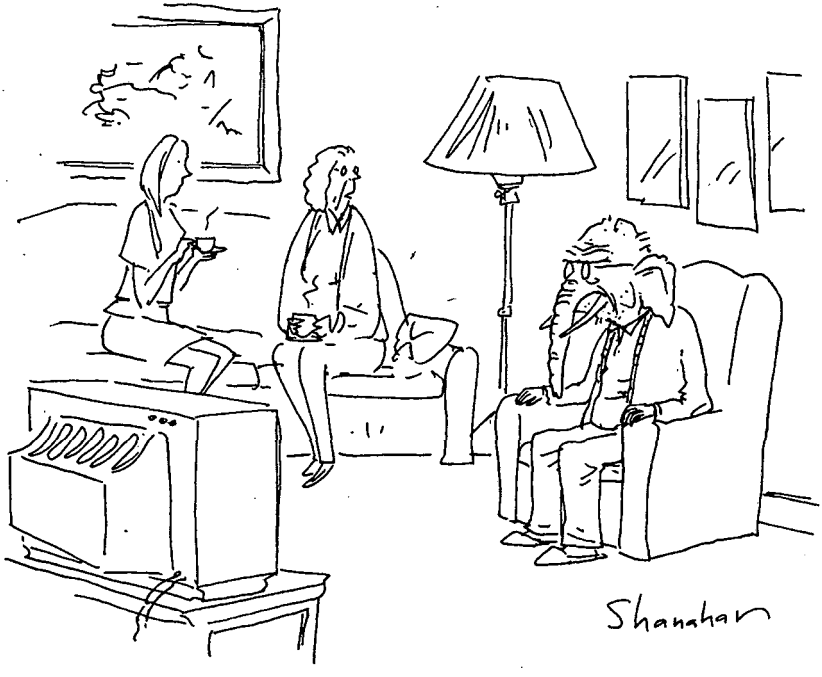
Althea was thinking: I hope the child's healthy. I'm getting on and I can use another servant. And if money gets short, I can always take it to a slave broker and sell it.

"*Do* try to keep up, girl," she said aloud. "I want to be far away from here by tomorrow."

Tomorrow, tomorrow, thought Drusilla. What's so important about tomorrow?

Disconcertingly, Althea answered her thought.

"You'll know when it gets here," said the Sybil.



"Then, in an even crueler twist, Bernard developed Alzheimers."

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When Jack Cover created his stun gun in the 1970s, he dubbed it "TASER" as an acronym for "Thomas A. Swift and his Electric Rifle." The fictional characters from our youth tend to loom larger than any others, which is only natural considering the nature of young imaginations. But where do these heroes go? Are the Hardy Boys now running a computer game company (as Jay Russell suggests in his forthcoming novel Brown Harvest*)? Has Eloise renounced hotels in favor of a commune in the desert?*

Allen Steele considered Tom Swift's propensity for exploring beyond the boundaries of the known, and considered his many gizmos designed for climbing high and higher, and...dude, check out the results.

Tom Swift and His Humongous Mechanical Dude

By Allen Steele

(with apologies to Victor Appleton II)

1. Danger!

"WATCH OUT, TOM!" JUNIOR Bud exclaimed. "You're burning a hole in your crotch!"

Tom looked down to see the smoldering ash that had fallen from the bowl of his bong. Just as his best friend warned him, it had come to rest in the lap of his baggy shorts. "Aw, man!" he said heatedly as he swatted the ember away. "I just bought these yesterday!"

The ash fell to the living room floor, where it left a brown scorch mark in the plush ermine carpet. Tom ignored it as he carefully inspected the four-foot Pyrex tube nestled between his knees. Junior Bud exhaled the lungful of smoke he had managed to hold throughout the emergency. "Bummer, dude," his chum said. "Did you lose any water?"

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"Naw. Water's cool. Just gotta reload, that's all." Tom Swift III reached down to the glass coffee table, where a small heap of seedless sinsemilla lay on top of the current issue of *Scientific American*. Tom hated having ruined another pair of shorts, but he hated even more wasting good herb. But he had taken too big of a toke from that last bowl, and it had caused him to cough into the bong. Next time, he would have to be more careful. "Wanna see what else is on the tube?"

"Uh...sure. Hold on." Junior Bud glanced around the spacious living room for a few moments, searching the coffee table and mahogany end tables, until he found the remote lying on the armrest of his chair next to his elbow. He picked it up and pointed it at the 72-inch flat-screen TV hanging from the wall. It was showing a PBS documentary about Mars. "Boring," he said, and started channel-surfing. "So where's your ol' man, dude?"

"Somewhere in Egypt," Tom said distantly as he stuffed a pinch of dope into the bong's small wooden bowl. "Doing archeology stuff, I dunno." This was an untruth, for Tom knew that his father, the famed inventor Tom Swift, Jr., had flown the Flying Lab out to Redmond, Washington, to play golf with Bill Gates. But that was major uncool. "Where's your ol' man?"

"With your ol' man, I guess." Junior Bud was the son of Bud Barclay, and their fathers had been best friends since their teenage years back in the 1950s. That was long before rock was invented; Tom imagined they must have gone to piano recitals when they weren't building rocket ships or jet-propelled subs. "Think he'll ask you if you got a job yet when he gets home?"

"I'm working on it." Tom located the lighter, flicked it to life. "Went to the mall, filled out some aps. I might get a call from Radio Shack. The manager recognized my name."

"If he calls back, are you going to take the job?" Junior Bud was still playing with the remote, clicking from one channel to another in two-second intervals. Oprah. Boring. Sally Jesse. Boring. African apes. Boring. Some congressman on C-Span. Boring. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Boring. War in Eastern Europe. Boring....

Tom took another hit, a little more carefully this time, and considered the question as he held the smoke in his lungs. Then he exhaled, and

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after the initial rush subsided, he reached over to the phone and switched on the answering machine. The thought of working bummed him out. "Want some?" he asked, offering the bong to Junior Bud.

"Sure." Junior Bud barely diverted his attention from the TV as he extended his left hand across his right arm. Just as Tom placed the bong in his palm, his friend sat bolt upright in his chair. "Whoa, check it out! My favorite show!"

Tom gazed at the screen. Bud had found some Japanese anime. Enormous robots vaguely resembling shogun warriors were locked in combat, hacking at one another with giant plasma swords. Every now and then, the action was intercut with guys and chicks wearing skin-tight outfits, their eyes wide as saucers, their mouths tiny ovals moving out of synch with their overdubbed English dialogue.

"Aw, dude, this sucks." Tom shook his head. "Find something else."

"Naw, this is great!" Junior Bud hunched forward, propping the bong between his legs as he stared at the TV. "It's called...it's called...well, I don't remember what it's called, but it's great." He reached for the lighter, then pointed to a blond-haired girl wearing what looked like a school uniform. One of the robots had just picked her up in his fist, and she was screaming in a shrill, high-pitched voice. Junior Bud said, "Watch, man. I bet she gets her clothes ripped off."

Tom watched, and sure enough, a few seconds later the robot tore away the girl's blouse and kerchief. She had a nice pair, he had to admit, but watching anime wasn't exactly his idea of getting off. If anything, it only made him more frustrated. The last time he had a regular girlfriend was while he was still in college, but she dumped him after he dropped out in his freshman year, and ever since then the only time he got laid was when he picked up some high school skank at some rave club on Long Island. Junior Bud couldn't be doing much better if he was getting aroused by cartoons.

"That robot's a wimp," Tom said, trying to change the subject. "My dad's got a bigger one than that."

"No way." Junior Bud finally lit the bong. He sucked in a long hit, then raised his mouth from the smoking tube and regarded his lifelong friend with unfocused eyes. "That mofo's fifty feet tall," he croaked. "It can't be bigger than that. It's scientifically impossible."

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"Way, dude. It's...." Tom stopped to think about it for a moment, but found he couldn't remember just how tall his father's robot was. "Well, it's bigger than that."

"Sure. As if."

"Truth, dude," Tom swore as he reached for the bong. "It's down at my dad's plant, in the warehouse. He even let me work it once."

"No way." Junior Bud exhaled as he put his Nikes up on the coffee table. "Your ol' man never lets you near his stuff."

Junior Bud was correct. The elder Swift was reluctant to allow his son to use any of the miraculous inventions he and Bud's father had devised during their youth. At least not since the time Tom had borrowed his ultrasonic cycloplane and attempted to fly it to New Jersey for the Monsters of Rock show at the Meadowlands. Fortunately, Tom ejected from the craft before it crashed in the Long Island Sound, but that escapade had caused him to be grounded for a month.

"Yeah, well, he's out of town." On sudden impulse, Tom stood up. "I know where he keeps the keys. C'mon, I'll show it to you."

"Aw, man...." Junior Bud stared at the TV. "*The Simpsons* are coming on in a minute."

"You've seen it before." Tom picked up his cap, put it on backward. "Let's go."

2. An Amazing Errand

Tom and Junior Bud climbed into Tom's roadster, a bright red Jeep Wrangler with pneumatic jacks and monster speakers, and tore down the driveway of the Swift family estate where Tom lived in the guest house. They headed for Swift Enterprises, but first they stopped at the mall in the nearby town of Shopton because Junior Bud remembered that the new Fugazi CD was due out today. They spent a few minutes in the record store, looking for boarder music while trying to ignore the assistant manager following them through the aisles. Tom had been caught shoplifting in the store twice already, but each time the manager had been persuaded not to press charges after Mr. Swift made a few phone calls. Tom picked up four CDs and put them on his American Express card, then they left the mall and continued to his father's plant.

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Swift Enterprises was a sprawling complex of laboratories, machine shops, and aircraft hangars spread across four square miles. The original facilities had been built by Tom's grandfather, and Mr. Swift had expanded the plant by developing some useless wetlands adjacent to the runways. As they roared up to the gatehouse in front of the main entrance, an elderly security guard stepped out of the shack to greet them.

"Turn that down!" he shouted, cupping his ears against the music blasting from Tom's car stereo.

"What'd you say?" Tom asked indeterminably.

"I said...turn...that...down!" the guard bellowed, angrily pointing to the CD deck beneath the dashboard.

Tom turned to give Junior Bud a querulous look. "I think he wants you to turn it down, dude," Bud said. He had his hands clasped together in his lap to conceal the pipe they had been smoking since leaving the mall.

"Oh, yeah. Right." Tom pushed the Pause button. "Hi, Mr. Ames. How are you today?"

"What are you doing here?" Harlan Ames demanded. The former head of security for Swift Enterprises, he was one of Tom Swift, Jr.'s oldest friends, and Mr. Swift had found meaningful employment for him at the plant after the company had been forced to downsize. "I thought your father was out of town."

"Yes, sir, he is," Tom said. "He's...uh, in Egypt right now."

"He told me he was going to Washington State." Mr. Ames's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What are you doing here?" he asked again.

"Umm...I left my sunglasses in his office," Tom said. "I just came by to pick them up."

Mr. Ames said nothing for a moment. "If you left your sunglasses in your father's office," he said at last, "then what's that you're wearing?"

Too late, Tom suddenly realized his error. "Oh, these are my other sunglasses," he lied opaquely, pointing to his retro-style Ray-Bans. "I left my good ones here. I'd really like to get them, 'cause I'm going surf...I mean, to a job interview tomorrow, and the sun really hurts my eyes, y'know, and so I'd like to go hit my dad's office, y'know, see if they're there, which I'm sure they are, and...."

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Mr. Ames turned toward the shack, then he

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stopped to look back at the younger Swift. "You say you've got a job interview tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," Tom said. "At a major high-tech company."

"Uh-huh. I bet." Mr. Ames shook his head in disgust as he marched into the gatehouse. A few seconds later he emerged with a temporary vehicle pass, which he stuck behind the windshield of Tom's Jeep. "It expires at closing time," he said. "Go get your sunglasses."

"Thanks, Mr. Ames." Tom rubbed the bridge of his nose with the middle finger of his right hand. "Nice to see you again."

Mr. Ames glared at him, then shuffled back in the gatehouse, grumbling as he pressed the button that opened the electric gates. "If I didn't know better," he muttered, "I'd swear you were adopted."

"Senile ol' coot," Tom crowed as he floored the gas pedal.

A few seconds later, he pulled up in front of the main office building. Parking the Jeep in the slot marked Reserved-Swift, Tom climbed out and, followed by Junior Bud, sauntered through the glass doors of the entrance. The receptionist gave him a sullen glare but remained quiet as he marched past the front desk, and Bud paused to help himself to some of the chocolate mints she kept in a bowl on the counter before he trailed his chum down the ground-floor hallway to the executive suite.

His father's secretary, who had been there since, like, forever, spotted Tom as he strode into the suite. "I deposited your trust-fund check yesterday," Miss Trent said quickly, swiveling around behind her desk as she feigned a broad smile. "Your dad said that if you needed more, I could fax him and...."

"Naw, naw. That's cool." Tom waved her off as he headed straight for the closed door of his father's office. "I just stopped by to pick up my sun...uhh, I think I left my jacket in his office, last time I was here."

"Oh...." She seemed confused. "Well, I haven't found any jackets that look like yours," she added helpfully, "but if your father did, he might have hung it in his closet...."

"He probably did." Tom opened the door, reached inside to turn on the ceiling light. "Thanks, I'll find it myself."

"Man, she's really nice," Junior Bud said as Tom shut the door behind them. "What's her name? I can't ever remember."

"I dunno." Tom shrugged. "Miss Something."

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The office had once belonged to his grandfather, but Mr. Swift had moved in shortly after the founder of Swift Enterprises passed away. The walls were lined with framed photos of the elder Swift, many taken in exotic places like the Amazon rainforest or Antarctica, and the shelves were filled with scale models of exotic-looking aircraft, submersibles, and spaceships, a few of which were chipped or missing pieces after Tom had played with them on the floor as a kid. Half-hidden behind a battered model of the jetmarine was a photo of the three Swifts, taken during Tom's high school graduation. Tom was still wearing his hair long then, and he was flashing a two-fingered love sign at the camera. His father was smiling, his left arm around his son's shoulder, but somehow his expression seemed embarrassed. His grandfather scowled from his magnetic levitational wheelchair.

"Hey, dude," Junior Bud murmured as Tom walked around behind the desk, "where does your ol' man keep the booze?"

"Forget it. He doesn't drink." Tom opened the top drawer, peered inside. Everything was neat and tidy: sharpened pencils, rubber bands, thumb tacks, blank notepads, an ancient sliderule. Only his father would still use a sliderule.

"Bummer." Bud prowled along the shelves, checking out the models and pictures, until his eye fell upon an ungainly contraption: four oversized dragonfly-like wings mounted upon a slender fuselage, with a propeller behind its rear stabilizer and a broad plastic fan attached to its nose. "Yo, what's this thing?" he asked, picking it up. "Some kinda airplane?"

Tom looked up from the desk. "Whoa, dude! Be careful with that! It's mine!"

"Huh? What'dya mean, it's...?"

Junior Bud's thumb accidentally found the switch on the object's underside. The wings fluttered, then blurred into a flurry of motion as the aft propeller buzzed to life. Suddenly the miniature aircraft lifted off from Bud's hands and rose toward the ceiling.

"Aw, man...!" Tom dove beneath his father's desk. "Don't move, whatever you do!"

"Huh?" Bud watched in amazement as the miniature aircraft began to circle the room. He lifted his hand to point at it. "Is this something your ol' man...?"

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All of a sudden, the drone turned around and hurled itself straight toward Junior Bud. "Hey!" he shouted. "Jeez, it's...!"

Then the plastic fan smacked him in the face. "Oww!" Bud yelped, then he backhanded the contraption across the room. It hit the wall behind the desk. One of its wings snapped and the device fell to the floor, its propeller still buzzing. "What the...?"

"The ornithoptic insect annihilator." Tom crept out from beneath the desk and carefully picked up the broken automaton. He located the power switch and turned it off; the contraption gradually stopped purring, and it died in his hands. "The flying flyswatter," Tom murmured, regarding it with forlorn nostalgia. "My greatest invention."

Tom had designed the ornithoptic insect annihilator a few years ago in an attempt to impress his father. It was meant to be a robotic drone that would automatically patrol a room, seeking out house flies and mosquitoes with its onboard motion detectors and getting rid of them without human intervention. His father had authorized a small production run based upon Tom's prototype, but the flying flyswatter hadn't worked as intended; although it did an admirable job of killing flies, it also had an unfortunate tendency to home in upon anything else that moved. Although Mr. Swift canceled plans to distribute Tom's invention on the American market, Swift Enterprises made a small profit by selling its overstock to the Ukrainian National Army.

"Aw, man," Junior Bud said. "Sorry I busted it."

"Never mind, man. It sucked anyway." Tom carefully placed the flying flyswatter back on the shelf, then returned to the desk. He found the key ring for which he had been searching in the top left drawer. "Got it," he said, shoving the keys into a pocket of his shorts. "C'mon, let's go see the robot."

Outside the office, they found Miss Trent still sitting at her desk. "Did you find your jacket, Tom?" she asked.

"Uhh...oh, no, ma'am." Tom kept his hands in his pockets to keep the key ring from jingling. "Guess I must have left it at home. Sorry to bother you."

"Well...all right, then." She gave Tom an uncertain look. "I have to call your father in Washington in a few minutes. Do you want me to tell him anything for you?"

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"No, no, that's okay," Tom said reaffirmingly as he walked toward the door. "I'll see him when he gets home. Catch you later."

"I thought you said your dad's in Egypt," Junior Bud said as they passed the reception desk again. He grabbed some more mints from the bowl and gave the receptionist another smile, which she pointedly ignored.

"Egypt, Washington...." Tom gave a world-weary shrug. "What's the difference?"

3. Fabulous Inventions

Tom drove his Jeep across the plant grounds to an enormous warehouse on the other side of the runway and parked in another reserved slot with his last name painted on it. The buzz he had collected before leaving home was beginning to wear off, so after looking around to make sure no one was in sight, he and Junior Bud stoked up the pipe and took a few hits. Then he stashed the pipe beneath the glove compartment and they climbed out of the Jeep.

Mr. Swift's master ring contained nearly thirty different keys, along with a miniature remote that Tom remembered to use to deactivate the security system. It took several minutes for Tom to locate the proper key, but finally he managed to unlock the front door. The warehouse was pitch-black inside, and the two chums spent several more minutes wandering about in the darkness before they located the light switch next to the door.

"Whoa, wicked!" Junior Bud exclaimed as the ceiling fluorescents flickered to life. "What's all this shit?"

Across the vast interior of the warehouse, all the way to the far wall, were parked machines and vehicles of all shapes and size, some larger than others. Each was covered with spotted plastic sheets or dusty canvas tarpaulins; crates of spare parts were stacked nearby, and electrical cables snaked across the concrete floor.

"Stuff my dad invented." Tom led his friend down the center aisle. "That's his electronic retroscope, and over there's the triphibian atomicar...."

"What's that thing?" Junior Bud pointed to the largest object in the

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warehouse, a massive machine that vaguely resembled an enormous gyroscope. "A thermonuclear subatomic can-opener?"

"Naw, man, it's...uh, it's the...." Tom shook his head. "I forgot. He flew it to the Moon once, though."

"Cool."

They made their way to the back of the warehouse, and poked around crates containing the disassembled remains of the space solartron, the atomic earth blaster, and the spectromarine selector, until behind a wooden cradle containing the hull of the jetmarine they found a man-shaped object hidden beneath a tarp. A paper sign taped to its front read Ator.

"Here it is," Tom said, as he reached up to pull off the sheet. "My ol' man's robot."

Junior Bud gaped at it. "Aw, dude," he exclaimed, "you're such a liar! It's only seven feet tall!"

"Uhh...I thought it was bigger," Tom admitted in a small voice.

He also remembered it being a bit more impressive. The robot was plated with silver-gray Tomasite plastic save for the chain-mail covering the rotary joints of its arms and legs, with old-fashioned dials, knobs, and buttons arrayed across its chest. It had three-fingered claws for hands, and a pair of tube-shaped eyes protruded from its bucket-shaped head, from the top of which rose a slender wire aerial. For some weird reason, his father had chosen to give the robot a hinged jaw.

"Man, this thing's a piece of crap." Junior Bud stepped closer, rapped his knuckles against the robot's chest. "Doesn't it have any...I dunno, laser beams or anything?"

"Chill," Tom said frostily. "This was one of my dad's first inventions, okay?" He searched his memory. "I think he built it for use in nuclear power plants, but something screwed up." Or maybe it didn't screw up. His father was pretty sharp, but sometimes his inventions were only used once. Like the levitating roadway he had designed to help logging companies drive trucks into the Amazon rain forest. Greenpeace loved that one.... "So it ain't C-3PO. It's still pretty radical."

"Yeah, right. More like C-3PO's grandfather." Junior Bud walked around behind the robot. "Hey, check it out. It's still plugged in."

Tom stepped around behind Ator. Sure enough, a fat yellow power

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cable led from a socket on the robot's back to an electrical outlet on the warehouse wall. "Cool," he murmured. "They must have kept it plugged in to keep the batteries from dying."

"Maybe it still works." Bud grinned at him. "Think you can make it?"

Tom shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

4. The Return of Ator

Tom and Bud rummaged around the warehouse until they located the crate containing the robot's control unit, a wooden box with toggle switches, analog meters, and black plastic knobs on its Bakelite shell. "The world's first remote," Tom muttered as he opened it up to look inside. "Look...it's got vacuum tubes and everything."

Bud peered into the box. "I've got an old Fender amp I could use them in."

"No way, dude," Tom said decisively. "My dad'll get pissed if he finds this thing missing."

The control unit needed new batteries, but Tom found some D-cells in an equipment locker and inserted them within the unit. When he flipped the power switch, the box hummed to life and the dials glowed orange-red. Tom remembered that the knobs controlled the robot's movements, but when he turned one of them, Ator remained still. The two chums puzzled over this for a few minutes until Tom snapped his fingers. "Aw, man!" he exclaimed. "I forgot to turn the robot on!"

"I'll get it." Junior Bud sauntered over to the robot and inspected its chest panel until he found a button marked Power. He pressed it, but still nothing happened. "Maybe we gotta unplug it first," he said. Then he went around behind the robot and jerked the power cable from its back.

There was a low electrical throb from deep within Ator's chest, and then its eye-tubes emitted a bright yellow glow. "Yeah, that did it," Tom said. "Get out of the way and lemme see if I can make this thing go."

Tom turned the right knob to the right, and Ator's right arm swung upward in a swift, flat-handed arc. "Hey, look at that!" Bud yelled. "It's doing the Hitler thing!" Tom pushed it to the left, and the other arm raised to same position. "Cool," Bud said. "Now it's doing Frankenstein."

"Shut up," Tom snapped. "I'm trying to get it to walk." He studied the

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control unit, struggling to make sense of its various dials and toggles. It had been many years since the time the senior Swift had showed him how to operate Ator, and even then it had been only for a few minutes. If the right knob controlled Ator's arms, then what moved its legs? He turned the left knob to the right. Ator took a step forward, its right leg making a metallic grinding noise as its foot settled on the cement floor with a solid clunk. Tom turned the knob to the left and the robot's left leg followed suit.

"Real impressive," Bud said. "But you said it was sixty feet tall."

"Don't start with me," Tom began.

The two friends played with the robot for a while, getting it to walk forward, then backward, then to swing its arms back and forth. At first Ator moved slowly, the chain mail covering its joints rasping with each movement it made, its eyes flickering a bit until Tom discovered how to increase the voltage. After that the robot was easy to control; Tom marched it down the warehouse aisle, then stopped it in the middle of the warehouse floor.

Tom had just succeeded in getting Ator to do the hokey-pokey when they heard a car drive up outside the warehouse. He ran to a nearby window, peered out just in time to see Harlan Ames getting out of a white Land Rover with rack lights mounted on its roof.

"We gotta blow," Tom hissed. "It's that old guy again."

When he looked back around, though, Junior Bud was nowhere to be seen. And the control unit was missing!

No time to worry about that now. The elderly security guard had already checked out Tom's Jeep, and now was walking toward the warehouse door. Tom dashed past Ator, still standing on one leg, and headed for the front door. He got there in time to meet Mr. Ames just as he opened the door. The old watchman stepped back in alarm, his right hand falling upon the taped handle of his night stick, before he recognized the young heir to the Swift fortune.

"What the heck are you are doing in here?" he demanded.

"Just looking around," Tom said, searching for an explanation. "I think I left my jacket in here."

Mr. Ames gave him a skeptical eye. "You told me you were looking for your sunglasses."

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"Uhh...whatever." Tom reached over to switch off the lights, then stepped through the door and slammed it shut behind him. "Thanks for letting me look. I think I left them at home or something."

He started to walk past Ames, but the guard raised a hand to stop him. "Hold it right there, son. Where's your buddy?"

At that instant, Tom spotted Junior Bud creeping around the side of the warehouse. He held the control unit beneath his right arm, and while Mr. Ames had his back turned to him he moved quickly and quietly to Tom's Jeep. "Who?" Tom said innocently, trying to stall the guard.

"Don't play dumb with me. I know he's still in there." Pulling his key ring from his belt, Mr. Ames stepped past Tom to the warehouse door.

"Hey, Tom!" Junior Bud yelled. "C'mon, let's go! We're late for choir practice!"

Startled, Mr. Ames turned to see the other youth sitting in the passenger seat of the Jeep. The control unit was nowhere in sight. "Oh, that guy!" Tom said foolishly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ames. I thought you meant someone else."

Ames glared first at Tom, then at Bud. "Hey, Mr. Ames," Bud called, "why isn't there a bathroom in there? I had to go around back and find a tree."

The guard took a step toward the Jeep, and for a moment Tom was certain that he would find the control unit under the back seat. "I'll tell my dad we saw you today," he said observantly. "I'm sure he'll want to know you've been doing your job."

Mr. Ames stopped, and Tom detected the uncertain look in his eyes. After all, Tom's father was the owner of Swift Enterprises; there was no reason why his son shouldn't be allowed to visit one of the company warehouses, was there? And Mr. Ames was well past retirement age; he couldn't afford to lose his job just because he had harassed the boss's kid.

"Go on, get out of here." Mr. Ames cocked his head toward the Jeep. "Beat it before I go looking for dope."

"Thanks, Mr. Ames. Have a nice day." Tom strolled past him to the Jeep and climbed in behind the wheel. Junior Bud grinned at Mr. Ames and gave him a little wave as they backed away from the warehouse. Ames glowered at them, then turned to make sure that the door was locked.

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"Oh, man, you scared the piss out of me," Tom expelled. He glanced in the back of the Jeep as he drove toward the front gate. The control unit was on the floor below the seat. "And why the hell did you take that?"

"I dunno." Junior Bud turned around to pick up the box. "I just thought it looked cool."

"Dude...." Tom shook his head. "My dad's gonna be wicked pissed when he finds out it's missing."

"Are you kidding? He probably hasn't seen it in years." Junior Bud put the unit in his lap and absently fiddled with the knobs. "C'mon, lighten up. Let's go back to the mall."

5. A Strange Encounter

Twilight had fallen upon Shopton by the time Tom and Junior Bud returned to the mall. They smoked another bowl out in the parking lot while Bud played with the control unit, then they left the box in the Jeep while they went into the mall.

The two pals were hungry now, so they visited the food court and got some pizza, which they heartily consumed at a nearby table while eyeing the girl working behind the counter at Arby's. Junior Bud went over to ask her if she wanted to go party after she got off work, but she ignored him until her manager came out front and told Bud to leave. Bud did so, but not before he pocketed a handful of ketchup packets; he got his revenge by mashing them on the floor beneath their table. "Anarchy rules!" he shouted as they left the food court, and the Arby's manager stared back at them in confusion.

They wandered in and out of stores until they found their way to the ten-screen cineplex at the other end of the mall. They had already seen most of the movies playing there, and the ones they hadn't seen were lame, but since there was nothing else to do they decided to see again a Robert De Niro gangster movie which they agreed hadn't sucked too much the first time they had seen it. Tom was out of cash and the nearest ATM machine was all the way back in the food court, so he whipped out his trusty AmEx card and put the tickets on the plastic, and Bud paid him back by buying popcorn and a box of Skittles.

They managed to sit through the first half of the film before they

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remembered how it ended. Bud expressed his critical displeasure by throwing the rest of the popcorn on the floor, then they got up and left.

"Life sucks," Tom said vacuously as they walked out of the theater.

"Yeah, dude." Junior Bud shoved his hands in his pockets and glared at the children waiting in line with their parents for the latest Disney movie. "Let's go back to your place and smoke some dope."

"Yeah, cool. Maybe we can catch The Real World on...."

It was at that moment that they came upon the Radio Shack where Tom had applied for a job yesterday. The middle-aged store manager who had given him an employment application was standing just inside the door, demonstrating an answering machine to an elderly woman. Tom ducked his head and tried to quickly shuffle past, but the manager turned just in time to spot him.

"Hey, Tom! Hold on!" He excused himself from his customer, then stepped out into the mall. "Come back to see about that job?"

"Umm...yeah, sure." Tom glanced at the name tag pinned to his red vest: Rick Brant. "I just happened to be passing through, and I was wondering...."

"Of course you were." Mr. Brant regarded him curiously. "Say, have you visited an eye doctor lately? Your pupils are blood-shot."

"Uhh...." Damn! Wrong time to leave his Ray-Bans in the car. Junior Bud had drifted away to study the lingerie on display at the Victoria's Secret next door. "Just came from the movie. I think I was sitting too close to the screen."

"Sure." Mr. Brant seemed unconvinced. "Anyway, about that job. I looked at your application, Tom, and...."

"I won't be able to start next week," Tom said quickly. "I've got something else going on, and...."

"Perhaps that's just as well," Mr. Brant said, "because I wasn't going to offer you the job anyway." As Tom gazed at him in astonishment, the store manager went on. "I think I need someone a little more...well, mature...to work here."

"Mature?" Tom exclaimed childishly. "I'm twenty years old, man! How mature do you gotta be to run a friggin' cash register at Radio Shack?"

He hadn't meant to shout, but the old lady standing nearby glanced over her shoulder to glare at him. Mr. Brant gazed at him stoically as he

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folded his arms across his chest. "When your father was only seventeen...."

"Hell with my father!" Tom said infernally. "I'm sick of hearing about him!"

"I don't doubt you are. I would be, too, if I were you. But I was the same age as he was way back when, and all I wanted to do was the same things he was doing. I was an inventor once myself. I...." Mr. Brant sighed and shook his head. "Never mind. It's a long story. But I didn't have the opportunities you have now. If I did, do you think I'd be here?"

Tom started to retort, yet the wisecrack he wanted to make somehow couldn't find its way past his lips. There was a certain sadness in Mr. Brant's face, and Tom suddenly realized that he was gazing upon his own future. Spending his waning years in a New Jersey shopping mall, price-marking toy RC cars and trying to show some old biddy how to operate an answering machine....

"Rick!" The gray-haired woman turned to bark at Mr. Brant. "How do you get your voice to come out of this thing?"

"I'll be right with you." Mr. Brant rubbed his eyes. "I swear," he whispered beneath his breath, "she doesn't have a clue." Then he looked at Tom again. "Son, it's been a long time since I was twenty, but I think I know what guys your age would say. Dude...get a life."

Before Tom could reply, Mr. Brant turned and walked back into the store. "All right, Mrs. Drew. Let me show you how this works...."

Junior Bud noticed the wounded expression on Tom's face as his friend slowly walked away from the Radio Shack. "Hey, man, what was that all about?"

"I dunno," Tom said cryptically. "Let's just get out of here."

6. Robot Amok!

Life sucks. On the other hand, why did his world feel so empty?

Tom contemplated this notion as he and Junior Bud moseyed their way toward the entrance. Maybe getting stoned and hanging out in the mall wasn't all that life was about. It might not be holding down a job at Radio Shack, but seeing all those things his father had invented a long time ago had made him wonder if there was more to living than just

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getting by. All his other friends were either in college or had steady jobs; they had ambitions that went beyond finding a good party next weekend. What was he doing tonight? Going back to his parents' house to do bong hits with Junior Bud.

I'm mature, he thought. I'm twenty years old. How responsible do you have to be to get some respect?

When they reached the front entrance, they were startled to see people rushing through the glass doors. A fat lady in a Hawaiian-print muumuu nearly collided with Tom as she ran screaming past them. A yup was yelling into his cell phone; a couple of teenagers stared through the windows at something outside. From the far distance they could hear the whoop-whoop of an approaching police cruiser.

"Whoa," Bud murmured as they sauntered past everyone. "What'dya think this is all about?"

"Dunno," Tom said vacantly. "Let's check it out."

A crowd had gathered on the sidewalk outside the mall, their attention focused upon the parking lot. The blue lights of the police car strobed against the yellow sodium lights at the far edge of the lot, but it was gridlocked behind traffic attempting to leave and wasn't getting any closer. More people came toward them, and they joined the throng outside the mall even as Tom and Bud pushed through the mob.

Tom stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. Now he could see the cause of the commotion.

Ator was striding through the parking lot, its claws raised menacingly, its eyes flickering in the dark Long Island night with each step it took. An empty shopping cart stood in its path; instead of stepping around it, however, Ator picked it up and hurled it through the windshield of a nearby Toyota. Bystanders dashed for cover as the giant robot marched past them, a mindless juggernaut that paid no attention to any obstacles in its way.

"Aw, shit," said Tom with great feeling.

Ator picked up the front end of a double-parked Volkswagen and shoved it against the Datsun minivan next to it. It couldn't be mere coincidence that Ator happened to be here. After all, the robot had still been activated when they left Swift Enterprises. Somehow or another, Bud must have done something with the control unit that caused the robot to follow its radio signal from the warehouse to the mall.

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"Umm...." Junior Bud stepped back. "Maybe we oughtta check out the arcade."

Tom's first impulse was to follow his friend's advice. If they made themselves scarce, maybe they wouldn't catch the heat for any of this. But the robot would still be here, and people could get hurt.

"Naw, man," he said negatively. "This is our fault. We gotta do something about it."

He didn't hear an answer. When he looked around, Junior Bud was no longer standing next to him. Through the crowd, he caught a glimpse of his friend as he dashed across the parking lot, heading for where they had parked the Jeep.

"Hey!" Tom yelled. "Hold up, dude! You gotta help me here!"

Yet Junior Bud was way ahead of him. He got to the Jeep first, and snatched the control unit from behind the back seat. "I'm getting rid of the evidence!" Bud yelled back as Tom ran after him. "I'll call you tomorrow or whatever!" Then he turned and ran down the row of parked cars, clutching the box against his chest.

"Wuss!" Tom shouted boldly. "That's the last time I...I...." He couldn't think of a decent threat, and besides, Junior Bud was already halfway across the parking lot. "See if I invite you to my next party!"

He heard a crash from behind him, and turned just in time to see the robot pick up an abandoned baby stroller and pitch it against a lamp post. Ator was still tracking the signal from the control unit; Tom had little doubt that the robot would follow Junior Bud clear across Long Island, in the meantime leaving behind a trail of destruction.

Now the robot was headed his way. Behind him, Tom could hear more police cruisers approaching the mall. Yet he knew that the Shopton cops were ill-equipped to take down a seven-foot robot. Like it or not, he was the only person around who knew how to stop Ator before it harmed someone.

"Oh, hell," Tom muttered. "Maybe I can still get into the Army when this is all over."

The robot was marching down the row when Tom stepped directly in front of it. "Hey!" he shouted, waving his hands over his head. "Yo, Ator! Mechanical dude! Stop! Pull over! Chill!"

Yet the robot didn't pause for an instant. Too late, Tom remembered that voice-recognition software hadn't been invented when his father had

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cobbled this big mother together. He was still wondering why Dad hadn't been a little more cutting-edge when Ator swung its right arm at him.

Its claw nearly took off the top of his head before Tom hurled himself to the ground. He yelled in pain as the asphalt skinned his knees and the palms of his hands, and he rolled out of the way just in time to avoid being trampled by the robot.

Tom picked himself off the ground, watched as Ator stomped past him. All right, so calling a time-out obviously wasn't going to work. But maybe he could reach the power switch on its chest panel. Tom hesitated, then he lunged after the automaton.

Ator didn't detect his presence until Tom leaped straight onto its back. He wrapped his arms around its head and blindly scrabbled for the chest panel farther down the robot's thorax. For a few moments Tom was sure that he could reach the power button; from somewhere in the distance he could hear people shouting, urging him to hang on. But now Ator was aware that something was hindering its movements. It swung around, its left claw reached back to grab Tom's shirt.

Tom yelped as the claw ripped against his skin, then the robot tore him off its back and tossed him aside. His shirt ripped as he skidded across the pavement, and fireflies danced across his vision when the back of his head connected with the ground.

For a few seconds, Tom lay prone on the ground, the breath knocked out of him, blood running from his scraped back. He hadn't hurt this bad since he had played goalie for the Shopton High soccer team. Of course, he had been bounced from the team after the coach had discovered a joint in his locker, but that wasn't the point. Not only was he in considerable pain, but he was also good and pissed.

"Dude," Tom murmured hotly as he staggered to his feet, "you are serious toast."

He dug his hands into the pockets of his shorts as he lurched toward his Jeep, and found his keys just as a Shopton police cruiser pulled into the row. A cop jumped out and yelled at him to stop, but Tom ignored him as he crawled behind the wheel and jammed the key into the ignition. The engine rumbled to life, and Tom slammed the stick into first gear and left rubber behind as he punched out of the parking space.

Ator was dead in front of him as Tom's Jeep tore down the parking lot. He shifted to second and put the pedal to the floor, and braced his hands

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against the wheel as the headlights caught the sleek surface of the robot's back.

"Eat me!" Tom spat, and an instant later the Jeep's front end slammed against the robot.

Ator's chest snapped forward and its arms flung outward as the robot wrapped itself around the hood. The left headlight shattered; friction sparks whisked past the windshield and metal shrieked against metal as Ator was dragged beneath the vehicle. Tom felt a hard multiple bump against the tires as he ran over the robot, yet when he hit the brakes and looked back over his shoulder, the robot was still intact. Although there was a large dent in its back and one of its eyes was broken, nonetheless Ator was clambering to its knees.

Damn, but the old man built 'em to last, didn't he?

Tom grabbed the stick and jammed it into reverse, then planted his foot on the gas pedal. The Jeep's tires screeched as it hurtled backward toward the robot. Ator was almost on its feet again when the Jeep's rear bumper caught it square in the middle of the chest.

Its right arm connected with the roll-bar just behind Tom's head. Tom ducked, but kept his foot against the gas pedal. He heard voices shouting at him, and at the last second he glanced at the side mirror and saw police officers running away from their cruiser, then his Jeep slammed straight into the cop car.

Jagged pieces of Tomasite were strewn across the parking lot as the robot was crushed between the two vehicles. Something made a loud implosive sound from deep within the robot, then Ator's remaining eye went dark. Its jaw sagged open as its limbs suddenly went limp, and then the robot sagged forward and sprawled across the back of the Jeep.

Tom climbed out of the Jeep. "It's okay, officers!" he shouted with authority, raising his hands. "Everything's under control! Just call my dad, he'll take care of everything!"

"I'm sure he will." One of the cops was already pulling out his handcuffs. "You have the right to remain silent...."

7. A Hero's Reward

Tom opened his eyes when he heard the door to the cell block open. He yawned and sat up as a police officer approached the door of the holding cell. "Okay, you're free to go," the officer said as he unlocked the door and

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pushed it open. "Your bail's been paid. There's someone waiting for you out front."

A dapper young gentleman carrying a briefcase stood at the front desk of the Shopton police station. He introduced himself as Mr. Hardy, a senior partner with the law firm of Hardy, Hardy & Sons, and he waited patiently while Tom relaced the sneakers of his basketball shoes before he escorted the young man out to where his car was parked.

"The charges include damage to private property, reckless driving, possession of a controlled substance, and operation of dangerous equipment within city limits," Mr. Hardy said as he drove Tom toward his home. "We may be able to plea-bargain them down to lesser charges, once the judge has been informed that you were acting to prevent the robot from causing any further damage...."

"Solid." Tom hungrily eyed the Pizza Hut they had just driven past. "Hey, can we stop somewhere? I'm starving."

Mr. Hardy ignored him. "We can be sure that there will be civil suits as well," he continued. "Swift Enterprises has already received a call from the mall, and we'll probably be hearing from the insurance companies representing the owners of the various cars the robot damaged."

"Has my dad phoned yet?" Tom asked. He imagined that the elder Swift would be righteously pissed about all this. Indeed, Tom was prepared to be grounded for at least a month.

"I spoke with your father about an hour ago. He's flying home as soon as he's concluded his business with Mr. Gates." The attorney allowed himself a judicious smile. "Among other things, we discussed the possibility of you completing your education."

"Go back to college?" Tom shrugged. "Yeah, well, I guess that'd be cool. Maybe someplace up in New Hampshire." He'd heard about some wicked party schools in New England. Besides, he had always wanted to try snowboarding.

"Actually, we were thinking of sending you a little farther away." Mr. Hardy's smile became a broad grin. "New Zealand, maybe...or perhaps Guam."

Tom stared out at the passing street lights as he contemplated a prolonged visit to some faraway land. Little did he know that the Hydroponic Marijuana Cultivator lay in his future, and the exciting adventures that this invention would bring.

"You don't think we could stop for a taco, do you?" he asked saucily.

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"The Diamond Pit" gave us one look at the Roaring Twenties in this issue. Now Robert Thurston gives us a very different take at that particular period of time, and at the nature of time in general. Mr. Thurston notes that his reading habits were formed largely by the book collections of both his grandfathers, which probably explains some of the impetus for this time-travel tale. Aren't the worlds of our ancestors wonderfully alien and distant...and yet completely tangible?

The World's Light Heavyweight Champion in Nineteen Twenty-Something

By Robert Thurston

I AM THINKING OF AN OLD man and I am old now myself, not as decrepit-old as he was, but now I know the pathway to get there. I met him first in my kind of dark smoky tavern, timeless. I met his younger version soon after. In fact, it was not long after I met him the second time that I retired from the time-recording service.

The first time his age, I figured, had to be close to ninety or even one hundred, maybe a year or two over that line. He owned one of the ugliest dogs I'd ever seen. I always hated dogs. When I was about two years old, my step-grandmother's dog, a tiny hairy sort of mutt, chased me around a narrow side-yard next to the house where most of the family lived in small apartments and it nipped and bit me to its heart's content. I was terrified, a terror that received little sympathy, especially from my step-grandmother, an ancient looking tall old lady who wore Franklin Roosevelt glasses and long-skirted heavy nineteenth-century dresses, usually dark and somber if not a bit Dickensian. She did not like me and maybe disliked all children. The dog bites were never the dog's fault. I hated her. She died

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when I was still pretty young and it was the first death of my lifetime that I did not mourn.

This dog in the bar, a tiny dog past its prime with a real old-dog smell, reminded me immediately of my step-grandmother's dog, especially when he took my hand into his mouth and began to bite down. He had been lapping up beer in a cracked bowl when he took my hand instead, as I reached out to pay the bartender. In spite of my fear of dogs, I saw right away that this one had no intention of actually biting me. Its owner, whose face I had not yet seen, muttered boozily and incoherently.

"Says the dog won't bite you," the owner's companion said. The companion was a short pudgy man who stood on the lowest rung of his barstool and leaned toward me, inserting his head between the owner and the dog's. His face was close to mine and his breath smelled like an ancient carton in an alley.

Smiling insincerely down at the dog (my hand still in its harmless mouth), I took my change from the bartender with my free hand. I tried to gentle my hand out of the dog's mouth. It increased its dental pressure slightly. Gum pressure really — I could feel only a couple of blunt teeth. The owner spoke again, and his words again were unintelligible. The bartender, a man who apparently cared little about drinkers or dogs, nudged my drink toward me.

"Said the dog never bit nobody," the owner's interpreter said. "Nobody except a cop once or twice."

"My brother's a cop," I said. My brother had actually been forcibly retired from the force a few years before for brutality beyond the call of duty. He never explained and became instead a security guard.

"Oh. Maybe the mutt wants to bite you out of, oh, what you call it, some sort of guilt."

"Guilt by association."

The pudgy man laughed and sat back. His left foot slid off the barstool rung. He tapped his glass for a refill, and the bartender took it away. The dog continued to enjoy my hand. Its owner mumbled again and pushed the animal's beer glass a half-inch toward him. The dog's peripheral vision clicked on. He let go my hand and returned to lapping up beer.

I held up my hand and wiggled my fingers, happy to find them still intact. The dog's owner touched my arm, the way older men sometimes

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do, and mumbled. Of course I could not understand what he said. His face seemed oddly curved, and his prim tiny mouth did not jibe with his flat bulgy nose. He was nearly bald, a few fragile strands of faded yellow hair across the top of his brittle scalp. He looked ancient, Shangri-La ancient. I could hardly see his eyes because of all the intruding age around them.

"Says you're very good around dogs," his friend said before sipping at his fresh glass of beer. I picked up my drink, a gin and tonic, and took a hefty swallow.

The man's interpreter nodded toward him and said, "He was the world's champ in nineteen twenty-something."

Actually, he did not say nineteen twenty-*something*. He gave the exact year. I just don't remember it now.

"Really," I said. "That's nice." I searched for the champ's hidden eyes and asked, "What division were you champion of?"

Before he could mumble his answer, his interpreter leaped into the breech: "Light heavyweight. Light heavy champ in nineteen twenty-something. Beat somebody with a Slavic sort of surname." He did not, of course, say *somebody with a Slavic sort of surname*. Sports fans always know the exact names and dates. I just can't remember the name he said. I'm not good with names. Or dates. Facts and time confuse me. My profession, I guess.

"Light heavy, huh?" I said. "I'm not much up on boxing these days — "

"Who said anything about *these* days? I just said nineteen twenty-something."

"Well, I wasn't born then."

"Can see that. Not goddamn potted, y'know. When were you born?"

"Nineteen forty-something."

"Remember that year. Boxer with an Irish surname fought a Negro who was a credit to his race that year. Nineteen forty-something. You're pretty well-preserved, young fella."

"Thanks. I work out three days a week. When I was a kid, I knew more about boxing. Watched Friday night fights on the TV. Name Pete Rademacher mean anything to you?"

"Familiar. Don't recall."

"Ingemar Johanson?"

"Sure. Fought Patterson or somebody."

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"Believe he did. The champ was champ in the twenties, huh?"

"Yep. For thirteen and a half months."

"My grandfather was a fight promoter back in the twenties. I don't know if he was in nineteen twenty-something or not, probably was. He promoted a lot of fights around that time. Owned an auditorium where — "

"Oh, yeah? I was all over the map then. I'm only a few years younger than the champ myself. Don't look it, right?"

Mentally I shrugged, but I said, "You don't look so old."

"Right. I followed a lot of fights back then, knew a bunch of the fellas in the fight game. What was your granddad's name? Maybe I heard of him."

My grandfather's name didn't mean anything to him. He shook his head.

"Don't recall. There was a magician — "

"Know all about the magician."

"You related?"

"In some distant way, my father told me."

"Hear that, champ? You used to know the magician, right?"

Champ mumbled.

"Says he met him on the show circuit. Champ was doing his jump and exercise act. Appeared in skits, too. Greatest showbiz boxer in vaudeville since James J. Corbett, the ads said. Should have seen him jump rope. Real good at it. Made Sugar Ray, the *original* Sugar Ray, look like a street kid."

"I'll bet."

There was something like a smile on the champ's face. I wanted to cry. He looked so old. His blue serge suit would have been thrown out by Goodwill. He was the kind of person younger people laughed at.

"Champ'd like to know if you know of any fights your grandpa promoted."

"Gee, sorry. Some pretty big names came to town, but — "

"Any name at all?"

"Jimmy Riley, but he was a local guy. Pretty good, I guess."

"Jimmy Riley, yeah, I heard of him. Good little old boy. Used to get in the center of the ring and mix it up."

"Might be. Before my time."

Last I ever saw of Jimmy Riley, he was an old man whose whole face

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had been cauliflowered, much worse than the damage on the champ's face. I always thought that, under his cheap but always well-starched clothes, Jimmy Riley must have a cauliflowered body. He was like the champ by then, never said anything anybody could understand. He had to use a tubed metal walker to get around town, clomping it down before him and giving people a goofy smile. If you said hello to him, he smiled even more. He's been dead a long time. He was probably not as old as he had seemed to me. Maybe the champ, with that pastry-dough face of his, was younger than he looked, too.

"Any other names?" the pudgy interpreter said. "Champ likes to hear names. Remembers good when he hears names."

"No. Sorry."

"That's okay. Nobody's around from those days, 'cepting us."

He settled back on his barstool, his feet locked into a rung. "You remember any names, you just shout them out, hear?"

"Sure."

The champ nodded in agreement. I took my drink to a table and brooded there for a time. Almost too long a time. I glanced down at my watch and realized I had to be someplace. It was time to escape.

ATCH THE TRAIN to memory lane.

A trolley, actually. Even though the seats are hard and my crew's TV equipment tends to crowd the rest of us, the ride into town is comfortable. The trolley smells of new paint. Red, gold, and white paint. Men wear boaters and get along jolly well with each other. Women wear plain fabrics in colorful designs. Not a flapper in the bunch. Flappers are in big cities. Look for them to come to town with the out-of-town fighters, the big spenders, and the butter and egg men. Watch for them hanging off pinstripes.

I decide to be genial with the man next to me.

"Goin' to the fights?"

He pushes up the brim of his derby to see me better. He has rural eyes. Intense, colorless, distant. They make me realize how much of a city boy I am.

"I am a Baptist, son."

"Yes?"

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"A Baptist."

"And Baptists don't usually go to fights, that it?"

"Baptists do not generally speak to people who are going to fights."

"I'd forgotten how severe you Baptist folk are."

"Godliness is not severity, son."

"Whatever you say. Well, hang in there."

He looks at me strangely. In the past small-town people usually don't comment on anachronistic slang. They think it is just big city talk. Unless, of course, they are in the big city, in which circumstances they think it is just hick lingo.

The Baptist resumes his straightbacked, forward-staring position. He seems out of place, with me sitting on one side of him, a fat man telling Pat and Mike jokes on the other side, a barbershop quartet practicing quietly across the aisle. After I return from the past, I forget a lot of what you might call period detail.

I want the Baptist to be cheerful. I should, after all, be able to make him cheerful.

"Well, God's in his heaven, all right," I say, and he glowers at me. "I mean, take in that good clean air. Doesn't it make you proud to be a Baptist?"

"Son, we are passing the chemical plant, and the air is not what I would call pleasant. I would call that a stench."

He sniffs distastefully, as if he's borrowed God's nostrils. I take a deep breath. There is a mild chemical aroma in the air, a trace.

"Why, sir, this is nothing. Compared to what I am used to, this is fresh air."

"You must be used to the sulfurous fumes of Hell."

"No, just New Jersey."

I can say anything I want when I am in the past. It is rare for anyone there to even question me.

The Baptist returns to ignoring me.

I tell my crew to gather their equipment and prepare to disembark. Nearby men and women, clearly interested in all the cameras and electronic paraphernalia that do not exist in their time, pass joking remarks among themselves. We try to disguise the equipment as best we can, putting videocassette camcorders inside Brownie camera boxes and

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planting a lot of tech stuff in old peeling suitcases, but still the sheer amount of it is noticeable and worth being puzzled over.

My crew are their usual passive selves. My chief electrician allows himself a polite smile as he gently lifts a child's hand away from his stuff.

We have almost arrived at the Coliseum. I can see from my seat without having to stretch my body for the view. It is a fat building with Turkish-style domes atop a complicated brick structure. The domes and brick do not go well together. That, I suppose, is the glory of America, especially here in the past.

The trolley comes to a smooth halt in front of the Coliseum, and all passengers are discharged. It is early. The boxing card will not begin for a while. Still, people are already milling around the entrance gates, talking easily among themselves, without the anxiety that waiting lines in my day often display. These people are at home with each other. People were then, I guess. It is a good feeling, and I stop to enjoy it. My crew spreads to each side of me, a double phalanx awaiting my command to attack. That is not even a correct image. My crew would attack nobody. They would not risk their equipment.

I wonder if we should shoot some covering footage, but it is a while before anything will start, so I decide not to. I tell my cameraman (once I knew all their names) to scout locations. My chief electrician asks what's this gig all about? I'm not sure, I said, it's something to do with some writer-geek who's making too much money wanting some period research about boxing for a TV program, maybe documentary, maybe not. I do not tell him why I chose to come to this place to do the research. He gives me a head-tossing nod and deploys the crew properly.

I wander around, taking in sights. When I am in the past, I can never avoid the thought that so much of what I see no longer exists, has turned to dust. I have a picture of my mother in a waitress uniform, from a slightly later time (she was only about twelve or thirteen at this time and not likely to be anywhere near a boxing match), standing by a table in my grandfather's restaurant and smiling as if there would be no tragedy in her future. And when I look at the photo, I feel that there will be no tragedy in my past.

"Boxing is evil," says a voice behind me, "two grown men beating each other's brains out."

I turn around, fully expecting to confront another stern Baptist.

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Instead, I have to look down at a small, compact, and rather pretty woman who was somewhere my side of thirty. She is wearing a faded-pattern, somewhat frayed dress which looks like it belongs to another era — I mean a different one from the time we were in. Forward in time. The Depression. She reminds me of an early photo of my grandmother, my mother's mother. That would, of course, be too much of a coincidence. Anyway, in the twenties my mother lived with her mother in South Bend, Indiana. She does not come from here to Indiana and go to the right church strawberry social at the right time and meet my father for some years yet.

"Boxing should be outlawed. Politicians should close it down, not profit from it. Blood and meanness, that's what it is. I swear I don't know why I love it so much."

I like her hair. It is a bit unkempt. Combed loosely, down from a middle part. Several strands of gray among the black. Pre-hippie hippie.

"My name is Alexandria Versailles. What's yours?"

I tell her my name.

"Then you are related to the promoter of this pugilistical engagement?"

"This what?"

"This exhibition of fisticuffs."

She points to a poster listing the night's card. My grandfather's name is at the top. He is the promoter.

"He is, well, a relative of mine. Distant. Quite distant, actually."

"An evil man, to prey on bloodthirsty inclinations. Are you also related to the magician?"

"Even more distantly."

"He is a very good magician. But I do not approve of magic. It appeals to my voracious hunger for fantasy."

"But you go to magic shows?"

"Often."

She smiles, obviously pleased I'd gotten her number so quickly.

"Is your name really Alexandria Versailles?"

"This week."

"And last week?"

"I don't remember."

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"I'm sure the promoter of these matches does not consider boxing evil."

"No, he sees it as competition. Read Sinclair Lewis. Businessmen in various enterprises generally see competition as a virtue and an ideal."

"But you find it neither."

"Since I don't compete, I won't judge."

"But you've *judged* boxing as evil, said you don't approve of magic shows, also a judgment."

"The difference is in whether you see them from my point of view, young man. I've been hit, I've felt pain, I can judge boxing. I've withdrawn almost totally into fantasy, I can judge magic shows. But I have *not* competed, so I won't judge competition."

"Not competed? Not in school? Not in the general run of things?"

"Not in any way I choose to see as competition."

"And, anyway, you lie from time to time."

"That's so, young man, though it is impolitic of you to say so."

A couple of men, obvious sports in their bright outfits and tilted boaters, look over at Alexandria and me. One of them holds a white-gloved hand over his mouth. The other nods and smiles a mean smile. I feel they are talking about us, and it angers me, so I approach them. The talker quickly takes the white glove away from his face. The listener straightens out his smile.

"You found something about me funny?" I say to the talker.

"Well, no."

"You found something about *us* funny?"

"Not you, bud. Just her, the woman, she's the — "

"You will die, both of you," I say and return to Alexandria, who asks what I'd said to get such wrathful reactions from the men, who were still standing together, staring at us. I tell her.

"What good did that do?"

"Introduced an unpleasant idea to their fun."

"And they'll have to think about it for a while."

"Right."

"And maybe even examine the worth of their lives."

"You do this, too?"

"No, but I think I'll try it sometime."

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"If you really dislike the person, tell him that all of his loved ones will die."

"That might be a tad too cruel. You are an unpleasant young man, in some ways."

"Not young. Not young at all. I look younger than I am."

As I stroll around, searching for local color, Alexandria accompanies me. Inside the building workers are in the final stages of setting up chairs. Groups of eight or nine chairs are attached together as a unit and each unit can be set up quickly by two workers. When not in use for an audience, these chairs are folded up and stacked against a wall.

The arena itself is not especially large, nor does it have much slope to the floor. People in back rows would simply not see as well as those in front. The boxing ring is set up in a stage area at one end, instead of in the middle as in most boxing auditoriums. The favored chairs, the expensive ones, are on the stage and arranged around the ring. The rabble, of course, sits in the auditorium proper. Or not so proper, considering it is an audience for boxing.

Black velvet curtains are being strapped back by another set of laborers. When the place is not used for boxing, it houses vaudeville, touring stage shows, some special movies. My grandfather has another building, downtown, for regular movies. It started as a storefront nickelodeon, and he turned it into a movie palace.

Nobody pays much attention to Alexandria and me as we head toward the stage. There is sawdust on the floor, and my foot slides on little patches of it.

Before we reach the stairs to the stage, my attention is diverted by a large drawing that hangs on a wall by an exit door. It depicts, in rather primitive fashion, a big man standing stiffly and flexing his arm muscles. The man's legs are shorter than his torso, which seems too massive, even for a bodybuilder. The figure is dressed only in a pair of trunks. Crude squiggly hair has been drawn on top of the round head and some attention has been given to creating some fairly handsome, if ill-sketched, features on his face. Next to the man's wide calf is the signature, "Garibaldi." The letters are widely spaced, the loops large, and dots on the i's circular.

"Everybody stops at that," Alexandria comments.

"What is it?"

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"Self-portrait of Garibaldi the wrestler. He was here for a bout once, which he won. Afterward, he leaped out of the ring and drew this — I suspect to show that his artistic prowess was on the same level as his wrestling skills, or so *he* thought anyway. It's said that he makes the same drawing of himself every place he has a bout. Those he wins, anyway. I don't know if he's actively...*competing* anymore. That drawing was made, oh, years ago. Before the Great War, I think."

As we go up the stairs to the stage, a figure comes out of the wings and begins to inspect the ring and the stage flooring. He is thin, wiry. His body sends out rays of barely restrained energy. His movements are quick, a bit edgy. He might look like one of the boxers if the streak of white in his thinning, brushed-back hair did not suggest he was too old. He inspects the ring in the manner of a man who is expert at what he does and yet has a thousand other things to attend to, some unrelated to the task at hand.

Alexandria whispers his name to me, but that isn't necessary. I'd recognize my grandfather anywhere. He is even wearing a striped suit that I dimly recall from a photograph. The suit fascinates me because I've always pictured it as photo-album gray, when in fact it is a rich and deep brown. It looks just right on him, as clothing usually does on a man with a strong personality. I suppose that his possessions become infused with his identity, even subsumed by it.

Even though he is staring down at canvas and running his hands along a rope, I can tell he is completely aware of our presence. When he has satisfied himself about the ring's condition, he looks immediately at me, his gaze direct. His eyes, deepset, examine me as if he recognizes me. I am more conscious now of the precision of his avian facial features. The nose has a piercing sharpness to it, the chin is an aggressive knife-point. When I did know him years later, I was a child and his face had aged a great deal, the hairline receded further, the angularity eroded over the years. But seeing him healthy is the big thrill now. I had known him as an asthmatic who spent most of his time in bed. I remember him talking in a wheeze, so when he addressed me now I am startled by the power of his voice.

"Do you belong here, sir?"

"Yes, I do, I am — "

"All right. I believe you. Hello, Alexandria."

It is a rich voice, resonant.

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"Hello, Hank."

He laughs raucously and she whispers to me: "He likes me to call him Hank. I'm the only one he lets. It's a, well, conditional privilege."

He puts one foot on the second lowest step of the set of stairs leading up to the boxing ring, with his hand on his knee, leaning on the hand a little, and he talks to me as if we are old friends: "What I want to tell you is, I need a man of about your weight to fight the first prelim. Tanktown bum didn't show up. Last I heard he's soused up somewhere in some Polack North Buffalo tavern, and I don't expect to see the bastard tonight at all." It is a bit of a shock to hear my grandfather, who became so straitlaced in his old age, say *bastard* and *Polack*. "What about it, young man?"

"Jesus, I don't think I — I mean, my age alone'd — "

"How old are you, old-timer?"

"Forty-something."

"I was still strapping on the gloves at forty-seven. So was Bob Fitzsimmons, or was it Corbett, don't remember. Look, I can see you're not a fighter, you got outdoor skin, but you could pass. Pretty good build. You look young enough, mid-thirties even. And your opponent — well, he's seen better days himself, bud. He might be nearer fifty than you are, maybe past. I'm afraid to put a real brawler in with him, might kill him. You last a round or two, that's all I ask, and it's worth fifty smackeroos to me, cash on the line, and you're the right weight, and all I got's a ringer and I can't bring in a ringer, not with this crowd, a lot of betting moolah in this crowd. Anyway, my wife could take this bum, your opponent, with one powder puff tied behind her back."

(His wife. My grandmother. Dead very soon in childbirth, with my aunt.)

My mind collapses for a moment as I listen to his fast patter. I never heard him talk fast or use words like smackeroo and moolah. I was having a hard time with the new slant on my grandmother, who in faded pictures always looked gentle and delicate, with no punch at all.

"C'mon, I can tell you can do it, can't he, Alexandria?" I did not look at her, not wanting to see any encouragement from her. "Not many guys in your condition, bud."

"I work out. Take vitamins."

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"What good's vitamins?"

"Oh, just a theory they're good. Comes from, oh, the Midwest, I think."

"What do those crackers know?"

"I play racquetball."

"Never heard of it."

"A game. I play tennis, too. But I never boxed, and I think it takes some, well, some sort of conditioning, and — frankly — I value my life."

"Don't blame you there. But you can do it. You got good blood, I can tell."

Your blood, I almost say. But I am too tempted to play the role he has assigned me. Downstage, one of my crew was setting up the generator for his equipment (we rarely use power from the time we visit). He has been listening, and he nods toward me, as if he would be pleased to see me get mauled in the ring and would see to it that every moment was recorded on tape.

The idea of fighting is ridiculous, of course. No amateur ever fights at my age. I am, as I told Hank, forty-something. My father was nearly forty when he sired me, the last of his rather large brood. I can see, though, how Hank could have been mistaken. I didn't get the family curse. I do not look older than my years. I look pretty young, I do say so. Since my divorce, I have had no trouble dating women in their twenties, women who are twenty-something and take me as not much older than they. Numbers fascinate me.

But, youthful demeanor aside, I am sure I do not look like someone who could handle himself in a ring. Is my grandfather (with those strong knowing eyes) playing some elaborate joke on me?

"I'll do it," I say, and I find out there is no elaborate joke.

He gives me boxing gloves, red trunks with a white stripe, a gray tanktop, and tells me I got the afternoon to get in shape. He sends a guy named Jimmy to help me out. I have jumped rope for at least fifteen minutes, in a dim but spacious backstage room, and am on the verge of collapse, when I finally recognize that Jimmy is Jimmy Riley, the fellow who used to go around my town in the walker when I was a kid.

"You a fighter, Jimmy?"

"You're kiddin' me, right? You reckanize me."

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"'Course I do. Just making conversation."

"I went eight rounds with Benny Leonard last year."

"Good for you."

"He says I can fight him again. Enjoyed my moves, he said."

"Don't you worry about getting hurt, fighting guys like Benny Leonard?"

"What you mean? It's worth it. I like fightin'. I'm a scrapper since day one."

"But what about the future?"

"What about it? You do what you can now, that's what my pop told me. He died broke, so'll I."

So'll you.

"But your family, your children...."

"They got to take care o' themselves."

"But you could damage your brain, wind up going around in a daze."

"Ah, get outta here. You want to spar with someone?"

"What good would that do? I might get hurt. Got to save that for tonight."

"Geez, the things you guys'll do for twenty bucks. I swear I don't know how Henry F. talks people into it. He's doin' it all the time, saves hisself a bundle. He should get a string o' clubfighters 'n' let you bastards alone. Hold your left up higher, will you? My great-aunt Sally could floor you, you hold your gloves like that. Let me show you."

Alexandria, who left for a while, has come back. She watches me with some concern in her eyes. She didn't want me to take this fight, I can tell. She doesn't understand this is my grandfather I'm fighting for. I never had a chance to do anything like that. I have to do it.

For the hour before the fight bill begins I wander around the auditorium. I wonder where my father is. At first I think it might be the young man spreading sawdust around the floor in great rows, then smoothing rows with a garden rake. But, no, the boy is too young.

The time comes for the fight. My crew is now in their places, their pair of disguised cameras directed toward the ring, their equipment forcing the removal of a couple of front rows on one side, displacing some irked customers. Henry reseats most of them, getting the young boy who'd been spreading sawdust to squeeze a lot of folding chairs together to create some extra seating.

I am introduced to the crowd under a fake name that I hadn't been

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warned about. A number of fans seem to think I look like a bum. Fortunately, it is the first bout of the evening, and there is only a small audience.

The ring announcer says I have a string of victories out west. I hold up my gloved hands and do one of those little dances I've seen in boxing movies. The dance is sort of like the Mashed Potato with boxing gloves. Some people like it, and there is a scattering of applause.

The bum, my opponent, comes into the ring. He doesn't look like a bum to me. He's been around, sure, I can tell that, and the age in his face suggests he might even be as old as Henry says he is, but his mouth is mean and there is a hunger in his eyes that nobody should have.

When the fight starts, he pulls me into a clinch and tells me to tank it near the end of the second round. I am perfectly willing to oblige him and take the dive at that time. I just don't think I can last that long. His powder-puff punches put me in a daze that begins in the first minute of the first round. I don't know how that round ends with me on my feet. There is a pain in the hinges of my jaw whose origin I cannot recall.

I remember I threw a couple of blows myself, and the bum has to move into them to make them look good. There are a few boos when I return to my corner. I feel Jimmy Riley, who is acting as my second since he has no bout scheduled on the night's card, poke and tug at my face. There is a sting from some salve he dabs on my cuts.

"You're not very convincing," Alexandria Versailles says. I don't know where she came from. "Hi, Jimmy."

"Hi, Lexy."

"One of your kids is hustling change outside."

"I'll give him a good clip when this's over."

"That won't be long."

The bum guides me around the ring in the second round, and I managed to be knocked out at the right time. After the count, the bum pulls me up and says I did okay and thanks he needed the green, which he wouldn't've got if the fight had been canceled. Henry don't dole out the dough, he says, unless the match goes on.

In the locker room I am alone because Jimmy Riley has gone off to clip his kid. I hear the crowd cheering. The next fight is evidently better than mine. I don't care much. My face feels swollen and is throbbing with pain.

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Alexandria comes in. "See?" she says. "Boxing is evil. I loved seeing you knocked about. Some of the crowd liked you. That uppercut you landed in the first round was — "

"*What* uppercut I landed?"

"You don't remember? What a pity. It looked pretty good. Your friends with the cameras and junk loved it. The only convincing moment. Good thing there was no betting action. Somebody might cream you in an alley. I think everybody in the auditorium knew it was a tank job."

"Why'd he bother letting it go on then?"

"Henry promises a full card, he gives the crowd a full card. Besides, your opponent's one of Henry's charities."

"Yeah, he told me, in a way."

Another fighter comes in the locker room. I am a bit shocked. He enters with an entourage. A lot of people who can't help touching him. He wears a bright blue robe that looks silken, expensive.

I recognize this guy right away. He's the guy from the bar. The features of his face still in place, a jaunty bounce to his walk, an alertness in his eyes, the primness of his mouth even more pronounced, but still the champ, the light heavyweight champion back in nineteen twenty-something. And of course this is nineteen twenty-something. It might even be that particular nineteen twenty-something. It is quite possible I am here because I met him there. Often it happens that way.

He glances over at me, seems to recognize me. "Hey, fellow," he says. His diction is precise, surprisingly so for a man who could only be understood by his pudgy friend when I last met him.

I sit up straight, happy to be addressed. "Yes, sir?" I say.

"I saw your prelim. Get out of the business." Everybody around him laughs, even the silken expensive lady. A couple in the entourage look scornfully at me, including again the lady. The present, soon-to-be or ex-light heavyweight champion walks over to me and whispers, "You got no talent. Get out of this. Find a nice kind of life. This ain't worth it. You go in the tank, you stay in the tank. See my point?"

"Yes, sir."

He cuffs me with a surprising gentleness. I see so much life in his eyes. I wonder how long it will last. How long will it be before it goes, and he still has decades of life to go?

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He goes back to the entourage and I find a dark place to get dressed. Alexandria waits for me outside the locker room, and we find seats in the back of the auditorium. Henry joins us and offers me the twenty bucks. I refuse it. "I did it for the experience," I say. "I don't need the green. I got a job. That's my crew up there, moving a lot around the ring."

He nods and looks toward the stage, at the ring where the boy is wiping off the canvas with a large towel. "I wondered about them," Henry says. "They seemed to know what they were doing. I wanted to stop them, but found I couldn't."

"Nope. When we show up, you have to accept us."

"Why's that?"

"We come from another time."

"You know, I suspected that."

"So did I," Alexandria interjects. "I spot people from other times all the time. I'm good at it."

"You're supposed to be impressed," I say. "I'm not supposed to discuss this with you, but my brain's been knocked around tonight and I'm kind of addled."

"It's all right to tell," Henry says. "I believe in all possibilities. Anything I want to do I can do. And I will. That's what's so terrific about this country. So I guess even the fantastic is possible. I mean, what the hell, y'know?"

I could tell him about the licks the American dream will be taking later in the century, but why take the light out of his eyes? And anyway I'll remove most of this conversation through post-hypnotic suggestion before I leave.

I say: "Yeah, what the hell."

"Sure you don't want the double sawbuck?"

"Give it to a charity."

"Nah. I'll keep it."

"Suit yourself. Where's your son? Where's Don?"

He narrows his eyes. The narrowing makes his birdlike nose wrinkle, and it looks like it belongs on a different kind of bird. But he answers me: "On a trip. Down to Cuba. You interested in him? Is he the reason you're here?"

I am stunned. My father never told me he took a trip to Cuba back in the twenties. I wish I could have asked him about it.

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"No, he's not the reason. It's just a job. Hey, this guy, he's good, right?"

I point up at the ring where the once, now, or future light-heavy champ is entering the ring.

"Oh?" Henry says. "The guy *is* good, give him that, but he drops his left too much. Other boxers take advantage. Somebody'll cream him someday, then another guy'll cream him, and it'll go on until whatever happens, happens."

"That's what I've decided about life," I say. "It goes on until whatever happens, happens."

"Sounds pretty stupid to me."

Somehow I don't mind being chided by Henry. I like him so much I've stopped thinking of him as my grandfather.

We stop talking when the fight starts. My guy is really good. He comes out of the corner like a bulldog attacking an intruder, his arms flailing, his body bent forward, eager to start mixing it up, his whole being focused on mutilating the other guy. His opponent proves too mutilatable. It is not a long fight. It only lasts a round. But it is a round that brings the fight fans to their feet, cheering, including me and Alexandria. Even Henry.

I look over at Henry and see the glow of excitement, the pleasure of a good show, in his eyes. That look is costly. I miss nearly half the fight with my glance at him. I look back to see my guy deliver a series of jabs, sharp and rhythmic like a woodpecker attacking tree bark. He follows them with an abrupt right cross, then a gentle push with his left glove that decks the other guy. At the end of the count, my guy just nods to the hysterical crowd and returns to his corner. The other guy is worked on for some time before he comes to. He leaves the ring meekly.

When my guy comes up the aisle and reaches the last row, he recognizes me and he mouths the words, "Get out," then smiles warmly. There is, as they say in the fight biz, not a mark on him.

I hang around for a long while. I see my guy leave, the silken expensive woman on his arm, the entourage doing entourage things.

Alexandria stays with me for a while and watches while I chat with the camera crew about the footage they obtained. My stage manager says they didn't get much that was usable. The main event, brief as it was, would have some value for the company archives, even if the client didn't

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want it, but there was little to build much of a program around. He says my bout would make for a comic interlude but of course they would not, could not, use it.

After they pack up, Alexandria touches my hand. "It's been fun," she says, "but I have to go now."

"Where are you going?"

"To where I came from."

"And where is that?"

She smiles oddly. "That, my dear boy, is for me to know and you to...to not know. So long."

She strolls out of the auditorium without looking back at me. I think of what an odd bird she is, and how many odd birds I meet on my travels. I doubt she even belongs to this time. She might be an agent of my own time-recording service or even one of the competitors. Perhaps I have already realized that, and she has merely planted a post-hypnotic suggestion about odd birds. It's what I'd do.

I look around for Henry. There are only a few people about, and he is not one of them. The boy is sweeping up the sawdust that I had watched him put down earlier. Every once in a while he bends down, picks something up, and puts it in his pocket. I go over to him and ask him where Henry is. He says Henry by this time is checking out the bill down at his vaudeville house or packing up the film from the movie palace and putting it on the trolley where it will go on the beltline to Buffalo to be replaced by a new film.

As we speak, the boy bends down, sifts through the sawdust, and comes up with something. He holds it up to the light. It is a coin. A half-dollar. God, how long has it been since I've seen a half-dollar?

"I make a lot of dough sweeping up," the boy says. "A lot of coins drop out of a lot of pockets, you know? In the excitement, you know? Don taught me that."

"Don?"

"Don. Henry's son. He used to do this job."

Vaguely, I remember him telling me about it. I think we were in the little closet of a room he had at the nursing home. I think it was during one of the times he rambled on about some indefinite old times. I think I only half-listened, and I regret that.

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"Are you related to Don?" I ask, hoping this might be one of my uncles. "Or to Henry?"

He laughs. "Nope. Wish I was. They got it made."

Some tears I do not expect come into my eyes. "Yeah, I suppose they have," I say.

I decide it's time to go. Take the car back to the bar. Grab the trolley back to my folly.

In the bar, the ex-light-heavy champ is gone, and so is the dog, although there is still an old-dog smell hanging in the air. The pal, the short pudgy man, is still there, having drunk so much his head is hanging down almost to the surface of the bar. His hand grips a half-empty glass. Or would he see it as a half-full glass? His head twists sideways. Recognizing me, he tries to say something. But he can't talk. "The champ's terrific," I say, "so's his dog." That seems to satisfy him.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH we promise to take you into the future and into the past with more great imaginative fiction.

One trip to the future comes courtesy of Carolyn Ives Gilman. In "The Real Thing," she extrapolates on some of the current trends in society with a tale that takes us into the future in search of love and good ratings.

New England's recent past is the setting for "Tom Kelley's Ghost," Steven Popkes's cover story for the issue. It's a lovely fantasy about the nature of fidelity, starring some rough figures from the underworld. Don't miss this one.

We'll also have a nice array of columns and fiction in the July issue, as usual. Coming months also promise such goodies as a new novella by Kate Wilhelm and stories by John Morressy and Robert Sheckley. Our annual October double issue is also coming soon, bringing with it new stories by Poul Anderson, Ray Bradbury, and Thomas M. Disch, plus a terrific space adventure by Ian Watson. Make sure your subscription's up to date so you won't miss a thing.

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CURIOSITIES

TRAVEL LIGHT, BY NAOMI MITCHISON (1952)

WITH LUCK, and perhaps the right illustrator, this could have been one of the last century's most popular children's books. Instead you might find it in its most recent incarnation (a rather sober Virago reprint) languishing on the fiction shelves in used book shops.

Halla is the northern King's baby daughter. The King remarries and the new Queen wants rid of the baby. Halla's nurse becomes a bear, and carries her off into the forest.

Halla lives with the bears, then a dragon, before returning to the human world. She speaks every language, including those of animals. She travels, first to Micklegard (Constantinople), then north again to Holmgard, near where she was born.

It is a rich and wonderful book with echoes of Mitchison's best-known work, *The Corn King and The Spring Queen*. Both novels have magical and non-magical peoples and places. As in Samuel R. Delany's Nevèrÿon series, Mitchison describes a world in flux where the old ways are being lost or left behind.

Mitchison wrote over seventy books of poetry, plays, wonderful autobiographies and novels of every kind — including science fiction such as *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* and *Solution 3*. She was always political and, even here gender, religious, and national politics play their part. But mostly *Travel Light* is a wonderful story that will transport you into Halla's world where a basilisk might be met in the desert, heroes are taken to Valhalla by Valkyries, and a fortune might be made with a word to the right horse.

—Gavin J. Grant

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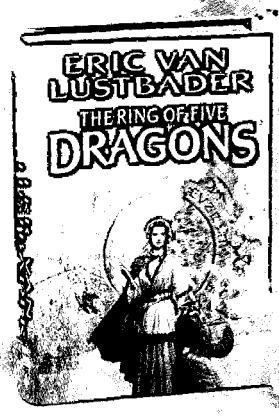

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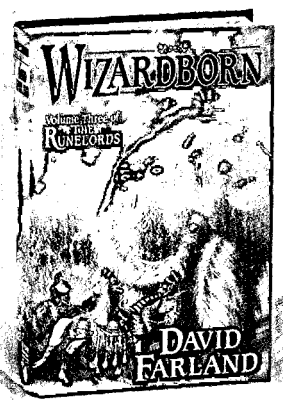

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